

# BLIND SPOTS THAT COST YOU REVENUE

By Brian Duke

## Mystery Guests Fine-Tune Experience, Drive Spend

There are certain topics that frequently come up with operators: staffing, food costs, marketing, and technology. And then there's the quieter one: guest experience. Not the big stuff like new attractions, but the small, everyday moments that impact how long guests stay, what they spend, and whether they come back. That's where mystery shopping comes in—and when it's done right, it can have a real impact on revenue.


Scot Carson

I recently sat down with Scot Carson, founder of Amusement Advantage, to talk about what operators can actually learn from mystery shopping and why it matters more today than it did ten years ago.

### TODAY'S CENTERS, MORE VARIABLES

With more than 30 years in the attractions industry, Carson combines customer service and quality assurance expertise with hands-on experience in amusement parks. That perspective led him to build Amusement Advantage, a mystery shopping program designed specifically for the complexities of modern entertainment centers.

He pointed to the added layers most centers are managing today: multiple attractions, expanded food and beverage, and more moving parts throughout the guest journey. "And when you add complexity, you add variables," he said.

More touchpoints. More transitions. More chances for friction to sneak in. "That's where blind spots show up," he added. "Not because operators don't care, it's because they're in it every day."

### FRESH EYES MATTER

One thing Carson said stuck with me: perception is reality.

Owners often feel like they know exactly how their operation comes across to guests. Managers assume they're seeing what customers see. Staff members think they understand how their interactions are landing.

But familiarity has a way of dulling perspective.

You might stop noticing that pricing takes four minutes to explain, or that the arcade attendant isn't visible from half the floor, or that your redemption process only makes sense if you already know how it works.

A mystery shopper walks in without that bias, and that's where the value comes in. "We're not trying to catch people doing something wrong," Carson explained. "We're trying to document what a guest actually experiences."

### THE FULL GUEST JOURNEY

There's a common misconception that mystery shopping is just someone walking in with a checklist and marking things off. It's much more about the full guest journey; from the moment someone arrives on property to the moment they walk out the door.

That includes everything from first impressions and greetings to how pricing is explained, how quickly guests get started, how visible staff are, and how smoothly food and arcade experiences flow. It also covers how issues are handled, how clean the facility feels, and whether the redemption process is clear or confusing.

In hybrid centers, all of those touchpoints are connected. "If the first 10 minutes feel confusing, that tone carries forward," Carson said. "If the last five minutes at redemption are frustrating, that's the feeling guests leave with."

Often times operators don't realize which part of the experience is shaping the overall memory. Mystery shopping helps connect those dots.

### PATTERNS TELL THE STORY

What's interesting is that the first report rarely uncovers a major failure. Instead, it reveals patterns.

- Upselling is strong on busy weekend nights but almost disappears during slower shifts.
- Food service hits its stride under certain managers, then becomes inconsistent at other times.
- Party check-ins work well—until the pace picks up and things start to bottleneck.

"Most centers are doing a lot right," Carson said. "We're not uncovering massive failures. We're identifying where tightening things up can make a measurable difference." Sometimes it comes down to speed; what Carson calls the "decision-to-fun ratio." If guests spend too much time figuring things out or waiting to get started, the energy drops.

Other times, it's complexity: multiple payment points; confusing prize tiers; policies that make perfect sense operationally but feel cumbersome to guests. Sometimes, it's simply visibility. "Guests shouldn't have to hunt for help," Carson said. "If something's broken and no one looks accessible, that impacts the perception of the whole facility."

None of these issues are dramatic on their own. But over time, they influence dwell time, spending, and whether guests come back.

## SPEED DRIVES IMPROVEMENT

One of the biggest advantages of a structured mystery shopping program is how quickly the feedback comes back. Reports are typically delivered within 48 to 72 hours.

"Guest experience data is perishable," Carson said. "If you're talking about something that happened two weeks ago, it's harder to coach staff. Managers don't remember the shift clearly. Staff don't remember the interaction."

Fresh data leads to better conversations. Instead of reacting to vague online reviews, operators get detailed, narrative-driven feedback with clear timing and context regarding who was involved, what happened, when it happened, and where.

That level of detail reduces defensiveness and increases accountability.

## BUILT FOR IMPROVEMENT

Let's address the elephant in the room. Mystery shopping sometimes gets labeled as a "Big Brother" tactic. Carson sees it differently. "If it's positioned as punishment, it'll feel that way," he said. "But it doesn't have to be."

The reports don't just highlight friction points; they also spotlight what's working at the center. Strong team members are identified by name, and specific actions are called out.

It's hard to build your company culture on vague praise. But when you can point to a specific moment, for example what someone did or how they handled a situation and why a solution worked, that's something teams can learn from and repeat.

## INSIDE THE PROCESS

Amusement Advantage maintains a network of about 70,000 independent contractors nationwide. Shoppers are selected based on their ability to blend in naturally and clearly document their experience.

"They have to submit writing samples," Carson explained. "We're looking for people who can describe both positive and negative impressions objectively." Each shop is customized to the facility with criteria tailored to its technology, service model, and operational priorities.

Shoppers follow structured guidelines, but they still move through the experience as regular guests. To keep perspectives fresh, they don't return to the same location for at least six months to a year.

The final reports are detailed, often six to ten pages, and include photos to support observations around cleanliness, food presentation, and overall conditions.

Before anything is delivered, it's reviewed internally. "We don't just send it through," Carson said. "We make sure it's actionable."

## MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

Toward the end of our conversation, I asked Carson what operators should look for when considering a mystery shopping program.

1. First, make sure the firm understands entertainment and attractions. "Retail mystery shopping doesn't translate," he said. "Entertainment has different rhythms and expectations."
2. Second, look for depth in the report, not just a score. "If you're only getting numbers, you're missing context. You need narrative."
3. Third, insist on speed. "Fast turnaround keeps it relevant."
4. Finally, use it strategically. "Don't chase every single comment," he said. "Look for trends. That's where the real value is."

Mystery shopping isn't flashy. It won't replace marketing or leadership, and it won't fix culture overnight. But it does one thing exceptionally well: it shows you exactly how your guests experience your center.

And sometimes, a fresh perspective is all it takes to increase the value of every visit.

Brian Duke is an industry consultant who helps companies boost sales, strengthen connections, and stay competitive in family entertainment. A veteran of the FEC and arcade world, he is known for his big personality, deep industry know-how, and ability to connect with just about anyone. When he is working with *IBI*, Brian focuses on uncovering great stories, connecting with standout suppliers, and helping us shine a brighter light on the FEC side of the business, all while keeping things fun and real. Contact Brian at brianduke2012@gmail.com.