

PERCEPTION STRATEGIES

Mystery Shopping Provides Customers View of Call Center

INDIANAPOLIS, IN — In prior issues of our predecessor publication, Physician Referral and Health Information Update we've looked at mystery shopping (October 1998, June 1999 and November 1999) as a key technique to insure quality within the healthcare call center.

Under a mystery shopping program, "shoppers" contact the call center under made-up pretenses and then carefully record specifically how the call was handled. A number of these calls are made and then compiled into a report for call center managers to digest. Reports can be compared quarter to quarter to see how the call center is doing and corrective measures taken along the way.

Since the time of our last story, a new company has entered the call center mystery shopping arena. Perception Strategies, Inc. in Indianapolis, a three-year-old mystery shopping firm focusing on healthcare, expanded into healthcare call centers about a year and a half ago. It's an interesting move given more and more call centers are taking aggressive internal measures to maintain quality.

So, why, if managers are already monitoring call center reps by listening in on calls is a mystery shopping program a valuable add-on? "The analogy I use is that of housing," says Kevin Billingsley, President. "If you've been in your house for six years you're not going to see the house the same as somebody who is seeing it for the first time." Mystery shopping, he continues, allows the call center managers the opportunity to see how call center personnel handle calls from the perspective of the consumer.

The mystery shopper compiles a report based on a variety of parameters such as number of rings needed to pick up the phone, the friendliness of the call center representative, their tone of voice and other features. "For example, we had one call center client where our mystery shoppers felt the representatives were speeding through the beginning part of the phone call," he says. "Our advice was for them to slow down. They talked so quickly at the beginning that the callers weren't necessarily sure they were in the right place."

Billingsley is currently working on a benchmark standard for elements of the phone transaction using a one to five scoring standard with five the highest. For example, the mystery shopper might access a grade of four on a particular call for friendliness. That could then be compared to an industry norm for that item.

Mystery shopping can also be an effective way to shop the competition. "We had one call center that wanted us to also shop three of its competitors," he says. "One of those call centers, out of 20 shops, was not perceived positively in any of the calls." That information was valuable marketing intelligence for the call center.

Billingsley argues that mystery shopping can work well for both non-clinical and clinical parts of the call center as the process information is the same and the numbers of calls not so many, compared with the grand total of calls received, that it creates a call logjam. Additionally, he maintains, simply telling call center personnel that a mystery shopping program is in place automatically draws attention to maintaining high quality in each and every phone interaction.

Printed with permission of Physician Referral & Telephone Triage Times. For more information about this publication, please call 770-457-6106.