Mystery shopping in libraries – are we ready?

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Abstract: This paper will provide insight into theoretical background of mystery shopping techniques and show its transfer from the business sector to successful implementation in non-profit institutions, primarily focusing on libraries. Literature review will cover main researches related to implementation of mystery shopping in libraries, as well as a pilot research from the authors where theoretical assumptions were subjected to real world conditions. In the end, the authors will try to give recommendations and guidelines for future implementations of mystery shopping in libraries. The research will try to show in what extent are librarians ready for increasingly competitive field of providing information services by adopting business methods of service evaluation and how mystery shopping technique can be implemented together with other standard methods, such as surveys or interviews, in order to increase customer satisfaction and improve standards of library service.
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1. Introduction

„Mystery shopping", „test shopping", or „secret shopping" is one of the methods used to examine the quality and standards of customer service. As a form of participant or disguised observation (Cohen, 2007), this method uses trained researchers which, using pre-determined questionnaires and protocols, act as real customers to evaluate different elements of customer service, without personnel knowing they were being tested. In the area of libraries, mystery shopping is mainly used to examine the quality of reference services, but other factors, such as library layout, staff courtesy or even the cleanliness of library facilities can be evaluated in order to get a snapshot of the whole customer experience (Calvert, 2004). Results of mystery shopping are often used as a benchmarking tool to enable comparison with other similar institutions as well as an indicator of areas inside the institution that are performing well or those that are not on the satisfactory level of customer service.

2. Mystery shopping – theoretical background

According to Wilson (2001) the origins of mystery shopping can be derived from the field of cultural anthropology, where the technique of participant observation is used to interact with the subjects being observed: the researcher is taking part in the daily life of a certain group to understand their norms, behaviors or attitudes that cannot be communicated thorough language. In the business sector, the fully developed technique has emerged in the early 1980s and rapidly became accepted practice in industries such as banking, retail or hospitality (Calvert, 2004). As a technique, it has some advantages over the

classic methods, such as interviews or surveys: first, there is no discrepancy between the real and reported behavior; second, it can reveal facts that can be only brought by light in the natural settings; and third, it removes the problem of inferior verbal skills of the interviewed person that can limit the quality and quantity of information collected (Wilson, 2001). There are a few basic purposes for which mystery shopping can used in the business sector: measuring customer service, using it as a benchmarking tool to measure competitiveness, measuring effectiveness of training programs (raising personnel motivation and enhancing vocational training), using it as a measure against discrimination (insuring all customers are treated equally), or as a diagnostic tool in discovering potential weaknesses in the business process (Van der Wiele et al., 2005). One of the biggest advantages of mystery shopping is the quality of the data gathered, so it is very important that the entire process is strictly controlled. The whole process starts with the selection of mystery shoppers. To ensure the quality of results, mystery shoppers undergo different certification programs, such as one provided by the Mystery Shopping Providers Association (http://www.mysteryshop.org/). These programs clearly define goals and limitations and ensure that the data gathered is independent, critical, objective and anonymous (MSPA, 2012). Using pre-determined questionnaires and strict methodology, mystery shoppers visit the company evaluated. Although it is recommended to inform the personnel they will be evaluated by mystery shoppers in a certain period, the exact time of the visit has to be unknown to ensure that the personnel is acting in the usual way (Van der Wiele et al., 2005). Some authors have examined the reliability of results gathered through mystery shopping as a platform for decision making. Wilson (2004) warns about the small sample (sometimes only 3-4 visits) that can lead to big fluctuations in gathered results; Morisson (1997) concludes that the reliability of the results is still unknown because of the imperfect nature of human memory as well as the potential memory distortion. As for the effectiveness goes, Finn and Kayande (1990) have assessed the process from a psychometric standpoint and concluded that the method is much more reliable and cheaper than user surveys even if you take the higher costs into consideration. One of the very important parts of the mystery shopping process is having the proper ethical guidelines in gathering and presenting results. Cohen (2007) states that using the method of participant observation when dealing with evaluation of the process can raise some ethical concerns: the researcher is deliberately hiding the true nature of his visit and working under false pretenses. According to ESOMAR guidelines (ESOMAR, 2012) the analysis and presenting of the results can be done in two basic ways: anonymous and individual. While anonymous presenting of the data is oriented on the process rather than personnel, individual gathering can be used for direct personnel assessment, where the data can be misused as a method of industrial espionage or personnel lay-off (Shing and Spence, 2002).

Although libraries are non-profit institutions, there are some segments where library management can take advantage of mystery shopping techniques. Calvert (2004) recognizes that libraries follow traditional values, but they put a big effort into improving their customer and reference services using different evaluation methods such as surveys or interviews to achieve better customer value, so these areas can benefit from using mystery shopping. Kocevar-Weidinger et al. (2010) see a clear bond between the business process and library services so libraries can benefit from mystery shopping in the same way as businesses do – especially by evaluating reference and customer services. Since there are written standards for every part of library service they can be

easily compared to the results gathered by mystery shoppers and see if the service is at a satisfactory level. The importance of proper conduct of library staff was recognized by the American Library Association (ALA), whose department Reference and User Services Associations (RUSA) has published in 2004 third edition of their "Guidelines for Behaviorial Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers" (ALA, 2004).

The guidelines stress that the key factor of reference and information services are good communication skills, kindness and willingness to help the user. The way in which the information was given is equally important as the accuracy and depth of the information

3. Mystery shopping in libraries - literature review

The research on using mystery shopping in libraries can be classified according to three different approaches in recruiting mystery shoppers. First, the library can hire a specialized mystery shopping agency and outsource the process entirely; second, the library can recruit staff from other libraries to examine their services and vice versa; and third, in cooperation with a certain college or university department, the library can use students of compatible courses (business or LIS) to act as mystery shoppers. The following section will give a review of the selected examples according to fore mentioned categories.

3.1. Hiring a specialized agency

Vogt (2004) describes two examples where libraries used specialized mystery shopping agencies to conduct the research. In the first case, North-Eastern Education and Library Board (NEEB), Antrim, North Ireland hired a specialized agency to conduct mystery shopping research in their 38 library branches. The results were used for benchmarking and internal comparisons. The company compiled a report for each single visit and an overall report with suggestions for service optimization. The survey form evaluated the following sections: telephone, first impressions, customer awareness, computer offers and computer skills of the staff, services, service at the counter and overall impression. The assessment scale for each question ranged from 0 = poor to 10 = excellent. The staff was informed about the process through staff meetings and they were mainly concerned by being judged by an outsider. The total cost of the research was around 4,000 pounds. The experience was positive overall, as long as research limitations are recognized and staff can appreciate its positive effect. The second example describes mystery shopping conducted on council level in Sutton in 2002. Visits were made to both the main library and its branch locations. An external tester was commissioned with the job and provided with a checklist that the library had developed in advance. At seven pounds per hour plus expenses, the cost for the coach was relatively low. According to the responsible project manager, the careful selection and briefing of the tester are of critical importance. The Sutton library was critical in regard to staff from one library conducting such visits at other libraries. The first test round focused primarily on the quality of the information service and the friendliness with which this service was provided. The branch manager informed the staff that test visits would take place over the course of the following two months. There were no objections from the staff, as the employees are accustomed to inspections, data collection and surveys as a result of the continuous and consistent evaluation of service quality. The quality manger responsible for the operation assessed the result as positive and regards it as especially positive that this approach focuses on the "customer's

viewpoint." Due to good experience with the procedure, a mystery shopping visit is to be conducted once a year in the future – with an optimized checklist. Calvert (2004) presents two cases of where New Zealand public libraries used specialized mystery shopping agencies. In 2000, Auckland City Libraries conducted four mystery shops to gather information about the total customer experience from staff courtesy, to the cleanliness of toilers. Staff was informed in advance that there would be a mystery shopping program, and how often the shopper would visit. The results were given to staff with names blanked to ensure anonymity. The results showed that customers saw the library as a whole function and not as a series of separate functions. They did not like being passed from one member of staff to another – customers react negatively if that happens a lot. The results of mystery shopping were used in various process improvements, such as better shelf tidying or making sure that the catalogue is an accurate reflection of what was on the shelves. The experience showed that mystery shopping fitted in well with traditional evaluation methods such as surveys or focus groups, because it provided an in-depth view of the service from a customer point of view. Another public library from New Zealand, Waitakere public library, used an outside agency to run four mystery shops in one year. Shoppers who were not regular library customers were deliberately used. The primary objective was to receive independent assessment of customer service as it is actually experienced, and secondary to assess physical facilities and aspects of the service. Results varied between branch libraries, with some needing to improve shelf checking, and in others the staff should smile more. Staff had been initially untrusting, because they were not notified in advance, so it was concluded that in the next exercise they should be more involved in the whole process.

3.2. Recruiting your own staff
The second possible approach to conducting mystery shopping is recruiting library staff as researchers. In cooperation with six other London boroughs, Bromley has been carrying out mystery shopping for a few years, with the libraries testing one another (Vogt, 2004). The same checklists were used in all locations and the same questions asked when testing the information service. Each library was visited by two people, i.e. library staff from two other boroughs. At the end of their test visit, they had to agree on a unified assessment. The following categories are examined: Physical, Customer Care, Stock & Services, IT, Staff Knowledge, based on a scale from one to ten and supplemented by comments. Per participating library, about four to five employees were used for mystery shopping. They received corresponding training before the visits. The test rounds ideally take place three times a year and last half an hour each. Limited staff resources which can be devoted to such activities and a low level of professionalism do, however, represent potential problems. The following points were noted as positive aspects of this method: quick results, practical, less bureaucratic, staff are more willing to accept suggestions from colleagues than from external consultants, cost-efficient. As no external coaches are required for this approach, no additional costs are incurred by such services. On the other hand, however, the costs for sending internal staff on test visits and the assessment of these visits must be taken into account. The entire staff is informed that a test visit will take place within the next two months. The head librarians are informed of the results and pass these findings on to their staff. According to the report, the staff had virtually no objections to this approach as it is made clear right from the start that the service system as a whole is being tested, and not individual persons. Calvert

(2004) describes the mystery shopping process of Hamilton City Libraries that participated in council-wide round of mystery shopping in 2003, including public libraries, theaters, museums, and even swimming pools, stadiums or zoos. The decision to use internal staff was related to raising awareness among staff. Prior to mystery shops, managers form the facilities prepared a questionnaire covering diverse elements of service such as first impression, cleanliness, waiting times, etc. The mystery shoppers were given at least two tasks to perform during each visit. Each element of the questionnaire was given weighting for importance, so an overall score for each facility could be calculated. Outcomes have included diverse benefits, such as raising awareness of what it takes to provide excellent customer service, and how seemingly small things (e.g. the value of wearing name badges) play a significant role in the overall customer experience. Since 2003, mystery shopping has become an on-going process, seen as having played a key part in focusing staff on the importance of customer service.

3.3. Using students as mystery shoppers
One of the ideas that offer a new approach to the field is using college students as mystery shoppers. One of the methodologically most elaborate researches that used s students as mystery shoppers was conducted by Kocevar-Wielding et.al. (2005) where the services of Longwood University Library and Radford University Library were examined. Since the libraries could not afford to hire professional mystery shoppers campus's students were used. The additional benefit of using students was that they would reflect the demographics of typical library patron. Each library partnered with business faculty at their university who were knowledgeable about mystery shopping and who volunteered to solicit one or more of their classes to participate in the exercise. Librarians and their respective faculty members held student shopper training sessions in which they used presentation and role playing to teach students about the mystery shopping process; familiarize them with the service guidelines for the desk(s) they would shop; train them how to shop, including memorizing and asking scripted questions as a patron; and train them how to complete the evaluation forms immediately after shopping the staff. The main goal was to have shoppers who were knowledgeable about the kind of service they should receive, who would appear to be "average" patrons, and who could accurately record the information we sought through the evaluation form. The purpose of the study was to determine if mystery shopping is an effective method of measuring customer service at library public service desks. To ensure that mystery shopping was ethical, human resource departments verified that the research is in compliance with their policies. Employees were educated about the mystery shopping exercise before being asked to sign the forms and, had the option to not participate. At Longwood University, 100% of desk staff agreed to participate; at Radford University, all but one librarian chose to participate. Public service desk supervisors created a list of "typical questions" asked at their desks and chose questions that they believed would elicit the service behaviors being evaluated. Then, evaluation forms were developed for mystery shoppers to record their "shopping" experiences. For each behavior a 3-point range -- undesirable, adequate, and desirable- scale was developed. The customer service evaluation form also included space for the shopper to indicate what answer s/he was given in response to the question and a qualitative, open-ended comment option. It was shown that the students' comments provided some of the most valuable insights into the students' service expectations and delivery. The mystery shopping exercises were

conducted for approximately two weeks during the spring 2008 and fall 2008 semesters. Results, which included answers to the questions, comments about the service, and other qualitative data, were shared with the desk supervisors, the library administration, and most importantly, the staff who had been shopped. The main findings have shown that although we often think of reference librarians as being in the "answer business," our library patrons will be judging our efforts not just on accuracy but on customer service - the way in which the information is given is equally important as the accuracy and depth of the information. The report concluded that mystery shopping is an operationally feasible and effective tool to iteratively measure customer service at the library reference desk.

Another example of mystery shopping which recruited students was conducted by students of Library and Information Science at Stuttgart Media University, who have tested the Stuttgart City Library (Simon et al., 2010). The students organized the whole project, compiled all material like the questionnaires and additional manuals and analyzed data. The entire project in 2009 took a period of four months and combined methods such as evaluation scales, written reports and YES/NO answers based on RUSA guidelines. In summary, a database of results out of 78 tests was created. Also, the reference situation was evaluated according to ALA guidelines and some recommendations on improving the quality of reference services were given. The main recommendations were: stop all marginal activities, encourage hesitating patrons to ask, make the patrons feel recognized, ask clarifying questions, explain all steps of searching, use all kinds of information resources, make sure the patron is satisfied and encourage patron to return. In summary, the project was very successful - for the library on the one hand and for the team on the other hand. The library gained evaluation results which could not be achieved without the cooperation with a university. Based on these results, they learned that developing quality standards is quite a necessary measure but the regular evaluation of the implementation of these standards is essential. As a result, the library could improve the quality of their reference services

In a local study, students of the Department of Information and Communication Sciences, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb decided to test Croatian libraries using the mystery shopping technique. The focus was on the libraries whose scope and collection responded to the area of their studies i.e. social sciences and humanities. Therefore, three major libraries in Zagreb were chosen and tested during the period of two months in the beginning of the year 2006. The aim of the study was to investigate the current situation in Croatian libraries regarding information services, as well as to investigate the quality of student-librarian communication and to point out the problems that students are facing when using library services. Survey was based on the questionnaire divided into three main groups: attitude towards the customer, mode of responding and usefulness of information and general impression. Findings of this survey showed that there is a growing need of communication between librarians and students in order for libraries to better reply on the student information needs as well as for students to better articulate their needs. The survey showed that when confronted with the customer needs i.e. student needs, libraries are keen to make changes in customer care and information services department leading to significant service quality improvement. Therefore, more similar surveys investigating library user satisfaction should be made in order to constantly improve library services and reply to the user needs. The improvement of service quality indicates that the mystery shopping technique can be a useful way to view the library as customers see it, and

following that making library services more suitable for them

4. Recommendations and conclusion

Analyzing the research covered, some good practices and methods can be noticed. In order to help the libraries considering mystery shopping as a service evaluation method, we give some recommendations on those key steps in the process of mystery shopping.

The first important step in ensuring quality of data gathered is carefully selecting researchers that act as mystery shoppers. The obvious solution is to hire a specialized agency, but high costs can often be a big drawback. Although specialized agencies have the knowledge and methods for tailoring the process for libraries, as researches show, in some cases, the library staff can react negatively to an outside agency, criticizing their knowledge of the library environment itself and the library services. To resolve that problem, library can recruit mystery shoppers from other libraries inside the same library system. This can have two positive effects: the price of the process is considerably smaller, and by being involved in the process itself, library staff has the opportunity to see library services from a user point of view. As a negative side, using its own resources, library staff has to invest a considerable amount time, knowledge and effort into the process, as well as in analyzing and presenting the data gathered in an appropriate way. The idea that tries to offer new approach to the field is using college students as mystery shoppers. Recruiting LIS students can ensure that the mystery shoppers are acquainted with the area of library services, and the standards which library staff has to implement in their everyday customer relations. The process is usually planned and guided by their professor who is an expert in the area of user research and the library management of the institutions involved. This way both sides are benefiting from the process: student gather valuable experience in conducting research, creating methodology and analyzing data, while the library gets an affordable and reliable method for measuring their customer experience. This also closes the gap between the theory and practical librarianship, and also strengthens the ties between the LIS study and local libraries. This approach was well received in all the researches that have implemented it, both by the library staff as well as students, so it can be recommended as a suitable first approach to conducting mystery shopping in libraries. Of course, the final decision always depends on different factors, and every library should analyze the pros and cons of every approach and make a decision on their own.

The second very important consideration is alerting the library staff they will be evaluated by mystery shoppers. All the researches covered, as well as ESOMAR guidelines agree that informing the employees is a must. They should be informed of the period in which the mystery shopping will be performed, but the exact dates and times shouldn't be disclosed in order to ensure that the personnel is acting in the usual way. Apart from that, employees should be thoroughly informed on the guidelines and standards they are expected to know and implement in their everyday activities. Researches covered have shown that a detailed explanation of the mystery shopping process relieves tensions between staff, and that all the data gathered should be oriented towards enhancing the service and not to criticize the staff. Also, disclosing the whole process to staff removes the ethical concerns that the method of participant observation can raise.

The next important methodological aspect of the mystery shopping process is determining the number of visits per institution. In the researches covered, there

were significant approaches, from 3-4 visits to over 70 visits to a single library. The number of visits can depend on different factors: the number of areas inspected the number of staff involved, etc. Good practice has shown the importance of coordinating the number of visits with the level of detail in which the data is gathered. If the number of visits is small, then the process should be recorded in detail and have different approaches and more researchers involved. This can involve questionnaires, evaluation scales, YES/NO forms, as well as a detailed description of the impression the staff has left on the researcher. It is very important to record the process in detail, so that these results can be used as a good starting point for different statistical and non-statistical analysis of the data gathered. The final decision on the number of visits and the researchers involved should take these factors into consideration and make a decision that is best suited for the library in question.

The final decision in preparing the mystery shopping is determining which areas of the library will be evaluated. There are two aspects of the library service that are commonly evaluated in the researches covered: customer satisfaction and reference services. In the customer satisfaction area the main focus was on evaluating the library information services where the elements of communication skills and job-specific expertise were covered. Apart from that, some researches included the physical layout of the library in its evaluation. This would then include evaluating the library building on its cleanliness, room layout, proper signage, etc.

At the end, we can give some conclusions gathered from research covered on the experience different libraries had in implementing mystery shopping:

- the way in which the information is given is equally important as the accuracy and depth of the information - small things, such as a simple smile, are very important to users
- mystery shopping has enabled the staff to see their service form a user point of view - that raised the staff awareness and self discipline in the workplace
- mystery shopping is a process – it is effective only when implemented during a longer period of time so the level of service can be measured in different time periods
- the method and the results of mystery shopping have to be presented to the library staff, both the positive and negative aspects – the process should be explained in detail in order to avoid possible staff tensions or ethical problems
- the results should always be gathered and presented focusing on the process itself rather than individual performance – results should be used to enhance the service and not to evaluate the staff
- if the results show poor performance in some areas, actions to improve them should follow immediately – either by staff training, personnel guidelines or implementing new standards of service

The method of mystery shopping is still mostly used in the business sector, the main reason being the constant need to maximize the profit by optimizing business processes. But, using mystery shopping in libraries today isn't something revolutionary. The constant budget cuts as well as growing competition in the field of information services have forced library management to improve effectiveness and competitiveness of library service. In that sense, applying evaluation methods from the business sector is an obvious choice. By using mystery shopping techniques libraries can get "real" data on

the level of service and customer relations by providing insight from the user point of view. Although many of them using different approaches, all the researchers agree that mystery shopping is a very useful method for libraries and that it should be considered a viable addition to the standard evaluation methods of library service, such as surveys, interviews or focus groups

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