

Case Study: Telford and Wrekin 'Mystery Shopping'

AIMS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Mystery shopping is an extremely useful tool for providing objective individual feedback on the way that an organisation deals with its customers on a day to day basis. It's different from more traditional consultation methods, such as a customer satisfaction survey, because it explores customer experience in a snapshot of time, and records specific details of that experience. As such it is a very powerful tool for service improvement.



In Telford and Wrekin, the mystery shopping programme was designed to provide feedback on the everyday experiences residents have when accessing council services either face to face, by telephone or via email. The research also aimed to test how far the council were achieving the standards set out in their customer charter. The council chose four service areas to be shopped, which were Planning, Highways, Libraries and Housing. In addition, a sample of 'general' enquiries were also included in the mystery shopping research.

METHODOLOGY

In total, 236 'shops' were carried out across four specific service areas, in addition to a batch of 'general' enquiries. The shops were carried out using three methods of communication, face to face, telephone and email.

For this project, local residents were used to undertake the mystery shopping, specifically the face to face and email mystery shops. In total ten local residents were recruited to take part in the project, recruited from the disability forum, young peoples forum and the Telford readers group. The local resident team were complemented by a team of M-E-L trained mystery shoppers. All local residents received a half days training prior to the 'shops' taking place, and also attended a debrief session following the completion of the fieldwork.

In collaboration with the customer service team lists of scenarios were designed to be used in the research. To ensure we kept within the Market Research Society guidance on mystery shopping the scenarios all reflected typical everyday enquiries that would be made by customers; were appropriate for each service area and similar to the type of enquiries staff would be used to handling so not to cause an undue amount of work for any member of staff. Staff were also informed that the mystery shopping exercise would be taking place, but were not told which service areas would be shopped, or when exactly they would happen.

The shops took place over a four month period between October 2008 and January 2009. After each completed shop, residents completed an assessment form to feedback about the outcome of their experience. The assessment form asked residents about all aspects of customer service, for face to face shops this included being able to locate the council building in the first place, to the quality of the interaction with a member of staff, the knowledge surrounding the enquiry and the quality of any further information or follow up material supplied to the customer.

CLIENT SERVICE AND SUPPORT

The project was led by M-E-L's Council's and Consultation Team, Helen Clive and Karen Phillips. Helen said about the project *"The mystery shopping project in Telford was a real success, and I'm pleased to say that overall the findings demonstrated the excellent customer service the council provide. The research did highlight some areas for improvement and the customer service team are now putting action plans into place to address these issues. One unexpected outcome of the project was the impact on the local residents who carried out the mystery shopping: one shopper said 'I've really enjoyed being a mystery shopper. I have met new people, and been to places I haven't been to before. It's really given me the confidence to try new things in the future!'"*

To test whether service improvements are being put in place, and are making a positive impact on customer service in Telford, the customer service team hope to make mystery shopping a regular programme of activity in the borough.

This project was delivered through our Councils and Consultation Expert Practice Centre - one of several specialist Expert Practice Centres operating across M-E-L's Citizens and Neighbourhoods Team.

For further information about our mystery shopping, please contact Helen Clive via email helen.clive@m-e-l.co.uk or call 0121 604 4664