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Taking the mystery out of mystery shopping

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So, I walk into this ritzy store and pick out a great scarf I've been eyeing for quite some time, and then proceed to buy it with my agency's credit card. I take a quick look around at the organization of the store and analyze the friendly cashier on his customer service. Then, I walk down the street and try this fabulous restaurant where I can eat all I want of what I want—again on the agency's tab—as long as I fill out a simple form on the attentiveness of the waiter. Then I cash my huge pay check for my hard day's work.

Being a mystery shopper sounds pretty great, huh?

For those of you who answered yes to that question, maybe it's time to settle back into reality and accept that this kind of mystery shopping job most likely exists only in one's imagination. Despite the thousands of fraudulent websites and classified ads offering "easy money" and "free food and clothes," the legitimate mystery shopper jobs are far less extravagant—and a lot more work.

Before diving into the exaggerated hoaxes related to mystery shopping, let's first establish what it really is. Mystery shopping can be described as an objective, anonymous, third-party assessment of the customer experience, cleanliness, and/or products of a retail-based establishment, usually restaurants, hotels, banks, and stores.

Many companies find this approach efficient in determining their strengths and weaknesses because of the key advantage of anonymity taken from the point of view of an "average customer". Because let's face it—we all know we act differently when we think no one's watching!



So the companies that use mystery shoppers certainly benefit, but what about the actual mystery shoppers themselves?

Let's just say, no job is perfect. One of the first misconceptions about mystery shopping jobs is that people do it for a living. Assignments are few and far between at 1–2 hours apiece and usually pay a minimal amount, especially when

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reimbursement is involved to cover meals or purchases. Another misconception is that mystery shoppers choose what they want to buy when on an assignment, but in all reality, purchases and menu selections are almost always pre-determined. Yet another misconception is that mystery shoppers have the easy task of simply observing or giving their opinion on the establishment, when actually to do their job well, they have to be able to remember a lot of information all at one time without writing it down until later.

But, you may ask, if we are still interested—after realizing that it's not just shopping and eating out to earn a big, fat salary—how can we even begin to tell the good mystery shopping recruitment messages among all the bad ones?

First of all, promotions that glamorize what mystery shopping is about, making it sound like you're getting something for practically nothing, are almost always a scam.

Also, any promotion that offers a mystery shopping job—or the resources to find one—and requires ANY kind of payment from you up-front

should be avoided completely. There are ads and websites that will charge anything from an access fee to a (free if found elsewhere) directory, a registration fee for a useless "mystery shopper certification," a required cashier check deposit upon acceptance, and any other far-fetched reasoning to get your money in their pockets. Don't let them fool you!

Another thing to watch out for, especially if you're doing all your searching online, is websites that are poorly designed with confusing navigation systems and/or numerous non-working pages. They're usually a quick sign that whoever's behind the website is not someone you want to work for or with.

Mystery shopping has become a booming industry and provides opportunities for success to all parties involved if everyone has a clear understanding of what it is—and more importantly, what it's not. And as far as figuring out which mystery shopping promotion is legit, just go by the advice of John Swinburn, Mystery Shopping Providers Association Executive Director: "If the offer sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

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