

Mystery Shopping: An Insider's Secrets

by Karen Eidson (FabGrandma)

There has been some discussion on whether or not you can make money doing secret shopping. Well, that depends. How much time do you want to devote to finding the jobs, going to the store to do the jobs, coming home and reporting the job?

If you are staying in one place for a while, you can make a few dollars doing mystery shopping. When I worked in south Texas for two and a half years, I did mystery shopping and made about \$600 per month doing it. However, if you are traveling most of the time, I think it would be hard to get job assignments. If you are going to be in one place for a couple of months, it could be a fun way to earn a few extra dollars.

One of the secrets to making money doing mystery shopping is to apply to more than one company. When I did mystery shopping I applied to more than 180 places, simply because the more places you are signed up with, the more chances you will have to get an assignment. You won't know which company will have shops in your area until after you apply with them, and a lot of the time a company may only have one or two shops offered in a month. So, if you want to do a lot of shops and make more money, you need to apply, apply, apply to as many places as you can.

So, where do you find all these places to apply? A good place to start is at Volition.com. It is a Web site that has a lot of information pertaining to getting paid for doing different things. When you get to the home page for Volition, click on GET PAID. It will take you to another page where you can find information about getting paid for a vast variety of things. Click on GET PAID FOR SHOPPING. You will find links to dozens of Secret Shopping Companies. Start Applying.

Also, go to the forums at Volition and read the posts there. There is a lot of valuable information there. Just remember one thing; NEVER ask who shops whom on any of the forums or mailing lists. All of the companies you apply to require you to sign an independent contractors agreement, or ICA. In those ICA's you have agreed to never disclose who the clients are for that shopping company. And, a good secret shopper never reveals that kind of information.

Companies pay by three methods: PayPal; direct deposit; or by sending a check. Most of them pay by PayPal. It may be important to you to note when they pay for the job. Some companies pay as soon as the shop is completed, some pay by the end of the month, some pay by the end of the following month, so it could take up to 60 days to get payment. I have only had one shop that was never paid, and I have done a LOT of shops.

Almost every chain business is shopped. There are so many different kinds of shops-purchase and returns, (which I hate to do, my advice is to avoid those, they are not worth it). My favorite shops are bank teller shops and Texas Roadhouse "dinner at the bar" shops. I have done shipping facility shops, retail purchase and returns, retail purchase, bank teller, bank customer service, fast food, casual dining, tire store, jewelry store, mall information booth, "table audits" (which is observing people at a demo table or credit card application booth at a store), gas station, grocery stores, insurance agents, real estate, storage facility, auto dealer shops, just to name a few. The scenarios are given to you in

the job instructions. The secret shopper company tells you what they want you to look for and evaluate, and they usually provide you with a downloadable form to use.

Tips

NEVER take the form into the place you are shopping. There are a lot of ways to keep notes if you can't remember everything.

- I use my cellphone a lot for number type things, like timings. I just punch in the beginning time, and save it as a telephone number, then punch in the ending time and save it too. After the shop is over, I can then go home and fill out the form and delete the timings from my phone.
- If you have texting capability, send yourself an email from your phone.
- If it is a fast food shop where I have to eat at the place, I get out my checkbook like I am balancing my checkbook while I eat. I have a check register in there that I use for writing in things about the shop. You are the only one who sees it, and if someone sees you writing, then they see someone working with their checkbook, which we all do from time to time.
- I even bought a very small digital recorder and put it in my pocket. I can hear when someone finished taking my order, and when I say "Thank you" when I received it, so I just time it on my watch when I get home.

You do all of the reporting online. Sometimes they want you to upload receipts or other "proof" that you were actually at the place of business. Some companies want digital pictures of things that don't pass the evaluation such as dirty restrooms or missing signage. Mystery shopping is a very interesting hobby.

Here are some tips I wish someone had told me when I first started Mystery Shopping:

Make another log of companies you have signed up with. Columns for this log are Company Name, website address, e-mail address, date I applied with them, username, password, shopper ID #, a contact person, their mailing address, telephone number, fax number, their method of payment, and when they pay. Write all this info down from their Web site when you apply with a company, then either put it in a spreadsheet or add them as a contact in your Outlook Express or other e-mail software. You are in business and need to keep track of whom you do business with. It makes life easier, believe me.

Make a job log. The one I have has the name of the company I am doing the shop for, the name of the place I am shopping, the due date of the shop, the date I completed the shop, how much it pays, how much reimbursement it will pay (if any), the date it was paid, and a contact person's e-mail or telephone number. I also have a column called "status" where I put AP if I have applied for the job, change it to AS if the job is assigned to me, C if I have completed the job, and P for when I am paid for the job. I highly recommend doing this step because you will need to keep track of what you are doing and when you are paid.

A lot of companies want you to list nearby cities or zip codes where you are able to do shops. They enter your info into a database and when they have a job come available in

your area they e-mail you with a job offer. So, make a Word file that is a list of zip codes and cities so you can easily cut and paste the information into a job application online.

Some companies want to see how well you write, and will ask for a short writing sample. Write a short (2 or three paragraphs) report and call it My Worst Shopping Experience. Write another one and call it My Best Shopping Experience. Write one more document and call it Why I Would Make a Good Mystery Shopper (or Why I Would Make a Good Service Evaluator). Some companies want you to write a detailed narrative about a dining experience you have had. Save all of these files in a place where you can remember where they are. I made a new folder on my hard drive called Secret Shopping. I saved all of these documents in that folder. As I was accepted as a shopper for various companies, I made new folders in the Secret Shopping folder for each company so I can save any forms, reports, or other documents pertaining to that company in it if I need to.

Get a purse-size calendar. Make a note of every shop you are assigned so you won't forget. A lot of companies are unforgiving if you do not complete a job when you agree to do it. They lose contracts when jobs don't get done. If you find that you will not be able to complete an assignment, call as soon as possible to let the scheduler know.

While you should NEVER pay to apply with a shopping company to shop for them, I would recommend paying for the MSPA Certification. MSPA stands for Mystery Shopping Providers Association. They charge \$15 for Silver Certification, but it helps you get more jobs.

One other thing I recommend paying for is Roboform software. It is a little program that lets you fill in the blanks one time and it will automatically fill in forms for you when you are applying to companies online. It saves so much time and frustration, it is definitely well worth the \$25.

Create a resume. Use any work experience you may have and relate the skills you gained at that job to the mystery shopping requirements.

So, here is what your files on your hard drive should look like now:

My Documents => *Secret Shopping* =>* Documents for Applications

1. Best Shopping Experience
2. Worst Shopping Experience
3. Why I would be a good Mystery Shopper
4. Restaurant Narrative
5. Retail Shopping Narrative
6. List of Zip codes I can shop
7. List of Cities I can shop
8. My Secret Shopper Resume

My Documents => *Secret Shopping* =>* Important Information

1. Job log
2. Companies I have applied to log

My Documents => *Secret Shopping* =>* ABC Company

1. Downloaded job form
2. 1st shopping assignment completed form
3. 2nd shopping assignment completed form

My Documents => *Secret Shopping* => * DEF Company

1. Downloaded job form
2. Assignment completed

My Documents => Secret Shopping => * GHI Company

My Documents => Secret Shopping => * XYZ Company

My Documents => Secret Shopping => * 324 Company

My Documents => Secret Shopping => * ETC Etc Etc Company

Merchandising

Another kind of work available almost everywhere is merchandising. This is where you go to a store or business and stock the shelves according to a predetermined "Map" or Plan-o-gram. You can find a load of information on Volition.com about merchandising.

There are plenty of one time, or weekly one-hour jobs in merchandising. If you can follow simple directions you can stock or restock shelves. There is a need for this from everything from very small things like calling cards, chewing gum, and sunglasses to BIG things like 25 lb bags of dogfood and stuff like that. You are also hired as an independent contractor for most of these companies. You have the flexibility to create your own schedule, so if you are retired you can just work for an hour or two. Jump in, have fun, make money.

New product samples

Oh, I almost forgot this, have you seen those ladies that stand in the store handing out samples or showing new products I have done that, too. Those types of jobs are usually for two days, on Saturday and Sunday, for about 4 or 5 hours. They have a telephone conference call to train you for the gig, then you go to the store and do the job.

I have been paid \$14 per hour to stand in Wal-Mart doing that. You do have to have your own folding table and a white tablecloth, so there is a little bit of expense involved getting started.

When you sign up to do those, you never have to take a job if you don't want it, but if you do take it you will be expected to complete it. Then, after it is over, you go home and fill out a very simple report online, and wait for the check to come. Sometimes the job will be for two or three weekends in a row. I love doing these as they pay so well and then the job is over.

Karen Eidson and her husband Jim have been Workampers for 8 years.

Karen says, "We decide where we want to go, and find a job there. We have workcamped and lived in Georgia, Florida, Texas, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Arizona. We love our life and what we do. You can read all about our travels at FabGrandma!"

