



Application Of Mystery Shopping In Perspective Of Libraries

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ABSTRACT

This paper will enable to build an understanding into the hypothetical foundation of secret shopping procedures, demonstrating its transition from the corporate arena to fruitful execution in libraries. Literature review includes key studies on the application of mystery shopping and studies conducted under actual operational circumstances.

Eventually, an attempt to provide a blueprint of a proposal for developing a systematically planned mystery shopping initiative, based on the content analysis of the existing literature is proposed for libraries. By implementing business methods of service evaluation and demonstrating how the secret shopping strategy can be used in conjunction with other conventional methods, the study will demonstrate as to what degree librarians are prepared for the progressively ambitious area of catering to information services, concerning raising user contentment, loyalty and library service standards.

Keywords: mystery shopping, library services, performance improvement, user satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

The methods of testing the quality and standards of user, customer or client services are known as “secret shopping”, “plaza shopping”, “shadow shopping”, “test shopping”, or “mystery shopping”. This method is also known as participant, type of member, camouflaged perception or disguised observation, it employs trained researchers who, using pre-determined questionnaires and conventions, pose as real clients; customers to assess various aspects and components of customer service without the employees being aware and realizing that they are being tested. Mystery shopping (MS) is commonly employed in the library industry to evaluate the quality and nature of reference services, yet other elements like library format, layout, staff courtesy, and even the neatness and cleanliness of library facilities can also be analyzed to provide a picture of the entire customer; client or user experience.

Mystery shopping is carried out by a mystery or secret shopper. This is an individual who visits stores and behaves normally as a typical client or representative yet also gathering data about the products, resources and related activities of the store. The data that ought to be gathered differs depending on the firm; however, it may incorporate functional proficiency, product knowledge, displays, and user interactions. The main goal of secret shopping is to work on hierarchical execution, boost organizational performance, user loyalty, which helps libraries identify patterns, trends and when required, take a restorative move and remedial action.

The consequences of secret shopping are frequently used as a benchmarking tool to empower examination and comparisons with other libraries, as well as a sign of which sections within the library is working well and which is not. Although essentially a business-oriented strategy, it is progressively gaining traction in the library community as a realistic way to assess library users' relationships and information services. The central issue to adopting mystery shopping in libraries is to use the information gained for service improvement rather than for staff criticism.

Mystery shopping is now regarded as an assessment method for gauging the calibre of the client experience, goods, services, or personnel performance. It concentrates on how libraries adhere to rules. The purpose of the covert shopping is to determine whether employees are adhering to policy and the quality/standards of the library. Mystery shopping is a common practice at retail establishments, banks, libraries, theatres, hospitals, inns, and cafés.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF MYSTERY SHOPPING

As indicated by Wilson (2001) the beginning of secret shopping can be traced back to the field of social humanities, where the method of member perception is utilized to interface with the subjects being noticed: the researcher participates in the everyday existence of a specific group to learn their standards and comprehend about their norms, ways of behaving, and perspectives that are difficult to be conveyed through language.

The fully developed approach first appeared in the corporate world, in the early 1980s and quickly became standard practice in ventures including banking, retail, and hospitality. It offers certain benefits over traditional approaches like interviews and surveys as a strategy or technique: To begin with, there is no disparity between actual and reported behavior; secondly, it can disclose realities and facts that can simply be revealed in natural situations; and lastly, it eliminates the issue of the questioned person's poor or substandard verbal abilities, which can restrict the quality and amount of information acquired. Mystery shopping can be used for a variety of purposes in the business world, including measuring and estimating client or customer service, benchmarking competitiveness, estimating viability of training programmes (raising employee motivation and improving professional training), preventing discrimination (ensuring that all customers or clients are dealt with similarity), and diagnosing possible shortcomings in the business process. The selection of mystery shoppers is the first step in the procedure. To ensure the veracity of their findings, proficient secret shoppers go through different certification programmes. These programmes create clear goals and parameters and make sure that the information collected is anonymous, critical, impartial, and autonomous. Mystery shopper's alias secret customers visit the firm being assessed using pre-determined questionnaires and a firm process. Despite the fact that it is advised that employees be informed that they will be reviewed by secret customers or mystery shoppers at a specific time, the actual time of the visit must be obscure to guarantee that employees act normally. Few authors have analyzed the unwavering quality of the results collected via secret shopping as the basis for decision making. Wilson (2001) warns against small sample sizes (sometimes 3 to 4 visits) that can cause large variability in the results collected. Morrison, Colman and Preston (1997) presume that the dependability of the outcome is as yet unclear due to the imperfections of human memory and the potential for memory bias. For adequacy, Finn and Kayandé (1999) evaluated this method from a psychometric point of view and concluded that it was much more reliable and less expensive than user/client research, even considering the greater expenses and high cost. One of the most vital pieces of the secret shopping affair is having the right and appropriate moral rules for collecting and presenting results. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) expressed that the use of participant observation in assessing processes can raise ethical and moral concerns: researchers purposely concealing the real essence of the visit and work by pretending to be false. As per ESOMAR rules 2005, results can be analyzed and presented in two fundamental ways: anonymous or unknown and person or individual. Anonymous data display is process-oriented rather than staff-oriented, but individual surveys can be used directly for staff evaluation. This could allow the data to be misused as a strategy of industrial surveillance and staff dismissal (Shing and Spence, 2002). With respect to libraries, Calvert (2005) perceives that libraries follow conventional qualities, yet uses a variety of assessment methods, like surveys and interviews, to improve customer and reference services to accomplish better client esteem, so these regions can profit from utilizing secret shopping. Koccevar Weidinger et al. (2010) spotted a comprehensible relationship between business processes and library services, enabling libraries and businesses to profit from mystery shopping - particularly through references and customer; client; user service evaluations. All aspects of the library administration and service have written standards, so you can easily compare the results collected by the secret shoppers and check whether the service

and administration are at a satisfactory level. The significance of legitimate action by library staff has been perceived by the American Library Association (ALA) in 2004. The guidelines and rules emphasize that the vital components of reference and information services are good communication skills, friendliness, consideration and eagerness to assist clients; users; customers; patron. The manner by which the information is provided is as significant as the precision and profundity of the information.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study attempts to understand the concept of mystery shopping and its application in libraries.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study aims at identifying and describing literature published in the field of “Mystery Shopping” using different parameters. The main objectives of the present study are:

- (a) To develop an understanding of the concept of Mystery Shopping in libraries.
- (b) To know the areas of applications of Mystery Shopping in libraries.
- (c) To propose a model of Mystery Shopping for Libraries.

METHODOLOGY

The study is conducted using various academic databases (Google Scholar, Web of Science, Semantic Scholar, Ebsco Emerald etc.) to collect information/literature relating to Mystery Shopping using keywords like “Mystery Shops”, “Mystery shopping”, “Mystery Shopping in Libraries” etc. Only 28 results were found to be relevant after refining the search title. On further refining of the keywords, 08 articles and 01 discussion paper were found relevant, which pertained to application of Mystery Shopping techniques in libraries. All the filtered data was exported to MS-Excel on separate sheets and were arranged and modified accordingly for the analysis of the data.

ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY

Data collected through content analysis of research articles are organized and tabulated for this study. The analysis is divided under the following subheadings:

Author Distribution

The author wise distribution on ‘Mystery Shopping’ has been conducted to identify the contributions of number of authors in the filed.

Table 1: Distribution of Number of authors per article

| S. No. | One Author | Two Authors | Three Authors | Four Authors |
|--------|------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 |

Table 1 show that for conducting research in this area 06 authors preferred to work collaboratively rather than alone.

Country-wise Distribution

The country-wise contribution on ‘Mystery Shopping’ has been conducted to identify the contributions from different countries. These countries are grouped on the basis of decreasing frequency of their contributions that were counted and placed in the table according to their percentage.

Table 2: Country-wise Distribution

| S. No. | Countries | Records of 09 |
|--------|-------------|---------------|
| 1 | USA | 05 |
| 2 | New Zealand | 01 |
| 3 | Croatia | 01 |
| 4 | Canada | 01 |
| 5 | Germany | 01 |

Table 2 shows that 05 records of the total records were published from USA, 01 each from New Zealand, Croatia, Germany and Canada respectively.

Year-wise Distribution

The year of origin for each item was tabulated to find the most productive year. The analyzed data portrays that there were some years with only one publication productivity as shown in the table.

Table 3: Year-wise Distribution

| S. No. | Publication Year | No. of Publications |
|--------------|------------------|---------------------|
| 1 | 2004 | 1 |
| 2 | 2009 | 1 |
| 3 | 2011 | 1 |
| 4 | 2014 | 2 |
| 5 | 2015 | 1 |
| 6 | 2016 | 1 |
| 7 | 2018 | 1 |
| 8 | 2022 | 1 |
| Total | | 09 |

Table 3 the shows year wise distribution of publications relating to Mystery Shopping, and it has been found that 2014 was the most productive years with 02 of the total publications.

Research Areas (Keywords)

An analysis of the major Research Areas in Mystery Shopping is displayed in the Table 4.

Table 4: Research Areas (Keywords)

| S. No. | Research Areas | Records |
|--------|------------------------------------|---------|
| 1 | Mystery Shopping/Shoppers | 9 |
| 2 | User Studies/Experience/Assessment | 7 |
| 3 | Library Services/Practices | 4 |
| 4 | Public/Academic Library | 3 |
| 5 | Customer Service Quality | 3 |
| 6 | Customer Service Management | 2 |
| 7 | Reference Service | 1 |
| 8 | User Satisfaction | 1 |
| 9 | Evaluation | 1 |
| 10. | Monitoring | 1 |
| 11 | Incentives | 1 |
| 12 | Reputation Spillovers | 1 |

Table 4, highlights the major research areas, the analysis shows that 09 records are found to be Mystery Shopping directly it shows the importance of the research area followed by User Studies/Experience/Assessment with 07 records; Library Services and Practice with 04 records and in decreasing order with 1 record of Reference Service, User Satisfaction, Evaluation etc. It is also understood from the study that the related terms associated with the area in libraries include applications in user studies/assessments for Studying User Satisfaction, Library services/practices, Public libraries and Academic libraries, Customer Service Quality and Management, Reference Service as well as for evaluation purposes in libraries.

Research Strategies Used

An analysis of the major Research strategies used while doing Mystery Shopping is displayed in the Table 5. Authors have used multiple techniques to conduct the study.

Table5. Research Strategy used

| S. No. | Research Strategy | Records |
|--------|-------------------------|---------|
| 1 | User Experience studies | 3 |
| 2 | Empirical Research | 3 |
| 3 | Interview | 2 |
| 4 | Observation | 2 |
| 5 | Content Analysis | 1 |
| 6 | Verbal Argumentation | 1 |
| 7 | Ethnographic Research | 1 |
| 8 | Convenience Concept | 1 |
| 9 | Mystery Shopping Agents | 1 |

Table 5 highlights the major research strategies used while doing Mystery Shopping in the decreasing order of preference, the analysis shows that authors prefer various strategies for conducting Mystery Shopping at same time.

Data Collection Techniques Used

Table 6 shows an analysis of the Data Collection technique used for collecting the data related to Mystery Shopping in libraries.

Table 6: Data Collection Technique Used

| S. No. | Data Collection Technique | Records |
|--------|----------------------------------|---------|
| 1 | Survey | 2 |
| 2 | In depth Interview | 2 |
| 3 | Feedback | 1 |
| 4 | Mystery Shopping Agents | 2 |
| 5 | Rating Sheets | 1 |
| 6 | Video Reference / Real Time Chat | 1 |
| 7 | Convenience Concept | 1 |
| 8 | Snowball Sampling | 1 |

Table 6 highlights the major Data Collection techniques used for conducting the studies on Mystery shopping in libraries; it is observed that authors also used mixed techniques for carrying out researches in this area.

APPLICATION OF MYSTERY SHOPPING IN LIBRARIES

The following table is the result of the analysis of the Journal articles on Mystery shopping in Libraries which depicts the areas where Mystery shopping has been applied to achieve better services.

Mystery Shopping Applications in Libraries

| S. No. | Areas | Application |
|--------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Types of Libraries | 1.Public Libraries 2.Academic Libraries |
| 2 | Mystery Shopping Techniques | 1.In-person Hidden Shopping 2.Phone Secret shopping 3.Mixed/blended/Hybrid-Type 4.Virtual/Internet Mystery Shopping |
| 3 | Implementation (stages) | Selecting a mystery shopper, notifying staff, determining the number of visits, and the service/library area to asses. |
| 4 | Services | 1.Reference Service 2.User Satisfaction 3. Performance Evaluation 4.Provides Incentive/ Reward 4.Implementation of Uniform Service Standards |
| 5 | Quality Assessment | 1. Used as a benchmarking device to facilitate assessment and comparison with other libraries, as well as an indication of what segments inside the library are performing well and which are not. 2. Serves as a method of assessing the caliber of the client experience, merchandise, administrations, services, and personnel performance. 3. Evaluating and assessing the library information |

| | | |
|---|------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | | services. 4. Assessing the library premises for cleanliness, room configuration, layout design, as well as pertinent signage. |
| 6 | Evaluation | 1. Reference services 2. User service evaluations 3. Overall library Score |

Research-related models of mystery shopping can be understood by reviewing literature. There are several important stages to follow when implementing such an assessment method, including selecting a mystery shopper, notifying staff, determining the number of visits, and the service/library area to assess. Choice for the determination of secret customers ought to be founded on equilibrium of funds, committed to assessment of services, administrations, aptitude and expertise in terms of comprehending the functions, capacity, administrations and services of non-profit organizations. The undeniable arrangement is to recruit a specialized bureau, though it is usually expensive and requires more financial resources but, professional institutions have the knowledge and methods to tailor the process to the library. Libraries can also appoint mystery shoppers from different libraries inside a similar framework. This brings two beneficial outcomes: first is the significantly lower price of the process and the second is the participation in the process itself, giving library staff the chance to return to venture once again into the role of users and look at library services according to a client perspective. Besides this, library staff in utilizing its own assets requires a great deal of time, information, and exertion to process, analyze, and display the collected data in a pertinent manner. One of the realistic explanations would be the improved way to deal with the area in involving library and information science students as secret shoppers. Enrolling LIS students can make certain that the secret customers are familiar with the field of library services, and the guidelines which library staff needs to carry out in their regular client relations. The cycle is generally projected and controlled by the independent instructor who is a specialist in the field of customer research and the library management of the organizations concerned. This way reciprocal well-being from the interaction: students accumulate significant know-how in conducting research, designing methodology and examining data, while the library gets a reasonable and steady technique for estimating their client experience. This overcomes any issues between the hypothesis and pragmatic librarianship, and furthermore build-up the bond connecting the LIS study and neighborhood libraries. This proposal has been creditably welcomed by both library staff and students in all researches that have executed such strategies. Along these lines, it can act as the finest application for issues using particular assessment strategy such as secret shopping in the libraries. The second vital thought is that the library staff needs to be notified or warned if they are being assessed by secret customers, it is important to brief employees of the strategy being used through a specific timeframe. However, accurate dates and time ought not to be unveiled to guarantee normal ordinary practice. Further, research has likewise shown that it is a decent exercise to brief staff about the secret shopping strategies to alleviate possible staff strains and eliminates the moral worries that the technique for member perception can raise. Another significant methodological part of the secret shopping exercise is deciding the count of visits per institution. If the count of visits is less, then the exercise ought to be writing down exhaustively and have various methodologies and more researchers engaged. This can include surveys, assessment scales, YES/NO structures, as well as a comprehensive portrayal of the effect the staff has had on the researcher. It is vital to note the procedure thoroughly, so these outcomes can be utilized as a fine beginning stage for various factual and non-measurable investigation of the information gathered. The system needs to be defined meticulously with the intention to keep away from viable staff strains or moral issues. An ultimate conclusion in setting up the secret shopping is pointing out which regions of the library can be assessed. There are two factors of the library services and administration which might be generally assessed within the researchers evaluated: consumer loyalty and reference administrations and services. In the consumer loyalty vicinity, the primary recognition was on assessing the library information services wherein the factors of relational abilities, communication skills and job-related knowledge have been covered. With the exception that, a few researches incorporated the physical format of the library for its assessment. This could then encompass assessing the library premises on its cleanliness, room format, layout and design; appropriate signage, and so forth. The outcomes need to be used to upgrade the service and no longer to assess the staff and movements for development need to be characterized and initiated.

PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF MYSTERY SHOPPING IN LIBRARIES

On the basis of the study a Conceptual Framework as shown in Figure 1 has been drafted, for which the explanation provided in the following points are to be taken into consideration in order to attain the desired results in libraries:

1. For conducting mystery shopping exercises in a library, a secret shopper who pretends to be the patron, comes to the library and makes a query to the library staff.
2. The prime motive behind Mystery shoppers is to enable libraries and its employees provide quality service.
3. For doing this continuous training programmes may be organised or take a snapshot to measure ongoing current services.
4. Persons other than desk- in- charges are designated to receive and compile the shopping data, as mystery shopping reveals sensitive information.
5. For improving library services, without identifying individual worker, the reports of overall services measured, would be shared across libraries. The intention of the process is not to demoralize anyone, as each person involved in the activity knows that the data generated are important for further improvement of services in the library. Accordingly training programs are to be provided for improving services.
6. Maximum involvement of employees (Library administrators, In- charges, Staff) is required for successful planning, implementation and outcomes.
7. For evaluation, service guidelines are designed; feedback after each step of the exercise is gathered and modified accordingly for gaining maximum transparency.
8. For establishing a model behavior, written guidelines for appropriate patron services and behavior, is available at various patron dealing desks, ground rules are set after having considerate discussions with other library administrators and consulting guidelines for behavioral performance provided by other institutes.
9. It would be difficult for one secret shopper to measure all behavior, as there exists a list of model behaviors, so one has to prioritize the behaviors to be measured, prepare questionnaire accordingly, which leads to shorter reference interviews.
10. For maintaining objectivity, besides professional shoppers and firms, students and faculty members may also be considered, as they are familiar with the environment and their queries are more specific than other user's and outside shopper's, resulting in more accuracy.
11. Finally, a sort of service performance matrix is developed; staff evaluation process and action control with allegiance through mystery shopping reports and increased use of standards, will guide staff members towards patron service as a responsibility, with the result that secret shopping acts as a beacon light for measuring progress.

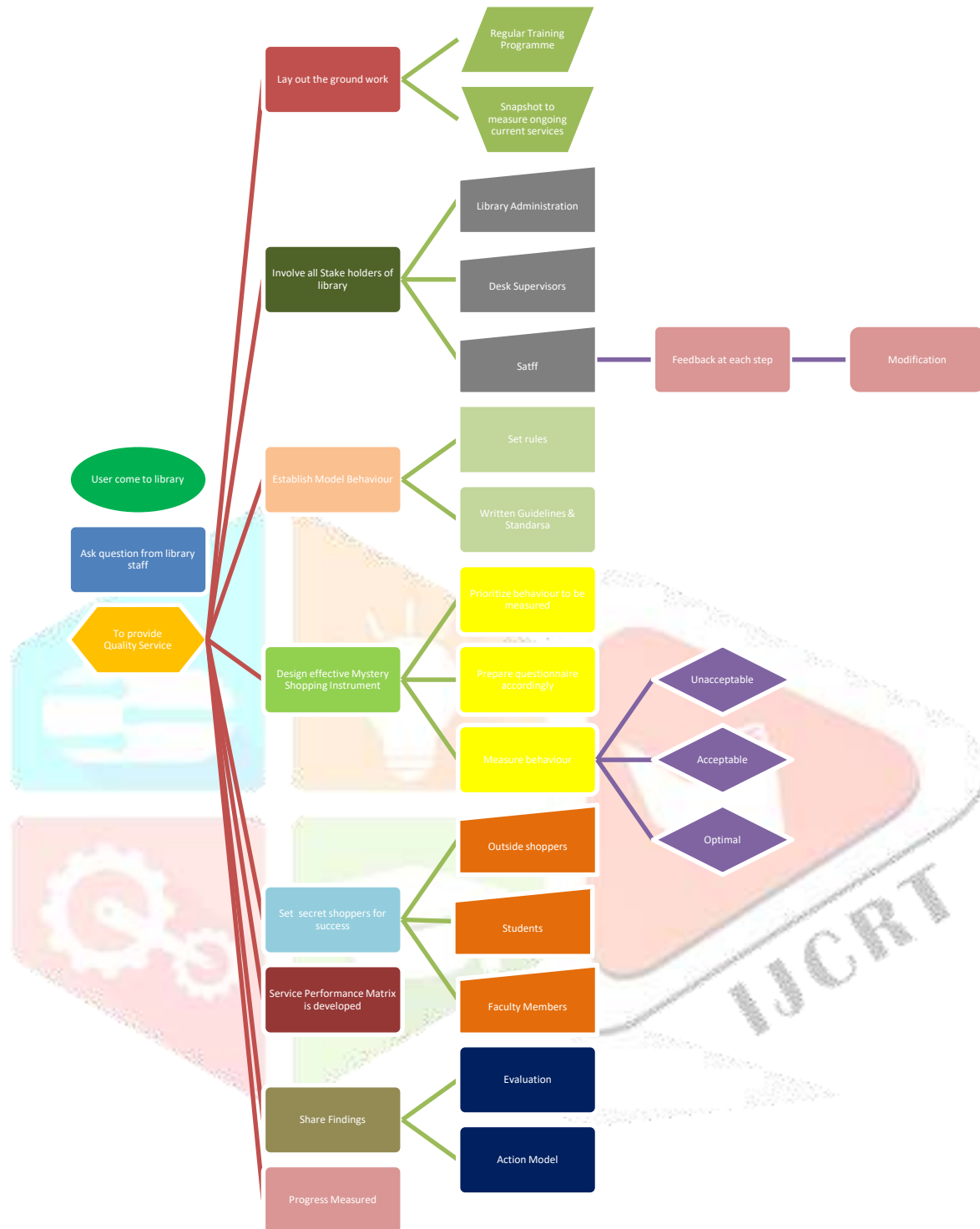


Figure – 1 Conceptual Framework of Mystery Shopping in Libraries

CONCLUSION

Mystery shopping can be used in place of more conventional, quantitative research methods and vice versa. In a user survey, the experience component of user satisfaction or discontent on a variety of service features can be made explicit as it is based on perceptions. Reference services and user satisfaction should be top priorities. The quality and service of these factors as determinants of the rational component of satisfaction are investigated through on-site reference desks. By obtaining "real-time" data, Mystery Shopping is a practical method for establishing relationships with users. A strong performance is mostly driven by user's scores; thus, mystery

shoppers cause them to comprehend how they affect the overall performance on-site through comparison and integration of their (Mystery shoppers) research method. The structure provides direction for library managers and administrators, as well as hypothetical ramifications for library research. Training improves performance and is a good way to monitor progress over long run. From the perspective of the library, the study offers library management a simple method to track activities at the place and comprehend areas that need to be modified in order to increase performance. Decision-making and technology implementation in libraries are aided by an understanding of user expectations. One of the criteria considered when looking for information is convenience. Managers can discover and compare mystery shop regions within a mountain area or between different mountain areas using information that comes exclusively from mystery shopping. Mystery Shopping produce fair and significant information helpful for consistent service improvement. This technique can likewise be applied to other library services by making the proper alterations and changing the perspectives and sub factors studied, for instance, it can be executed to assess the general performance of the departmental/seminar library staff across all library units by looking at how well information is exchanged at the circulation desk and the elements affecting staff conduct.

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