Mystery shopping in libraries – are we ready?

Mihaela Banek Zorica, Tomislav Ivanjko, Sonja Spiranec

University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of
Information and Communication Sciences, Croatia

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.

 Keywords: mystery shopping, library services, user satisfaction,

1. Introduction

„Mystery shopping", „test shopping", or „secret shopping" are the terms used
for the method of examining the quality and standards of customer service. As a
form of participant or disguised observation (Cohen, Manion and Morrison,
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, 2005). 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. Although primarily a business oriented method it is slowly penetrating the library community as a viable method of evaluating library users' relations and information services. The key point of implementing mystery shopping method in libraries is in using the gathered data for enhancement of the service and not for staff critique.

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 through 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, 2005). 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 to 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 be used in the business sector: measuring customer service, 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 (Hesselink, van Iwaarden and van der Wiele, 2005). The whole process starts with the selection of mystery shoppers. To ensure the quality of results, professional 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. 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 (Hesselink, van Iwaarden and van der Wiele, 2005). Some authors have examined the reliability of results gathered through mystery shopping as a platform for decision making. Wilson (2001) warns about the small sample (sometimes only 3-4 visits) that can lead to big fluctuations in gathered results; Morrison, Colman and Preston (1997) conclude 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 Kayandé (1999) 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, Manion and Morrison (2007) state 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, 2005) 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). As far as libraries goes, Calvert (2005) 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 Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers" (American Library Association, 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 –implementation
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 38 of their library branches. The survey form evaluated the following sections: telephone, first impression, customer awareness, computer skills of the staff, 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. 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 manager 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 (2005) 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 toilets. Staff was informed in advance that there would be a mystery shopping program, and how often the shopper would visit. 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). 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. 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 was 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 (2005) 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 and zoos. The decision to use internal staff was related to raising awareness among staff. Prior to mystery shops, managers from the facilities prepared a questionnaire covering diverse elements of service such as first impression, cleanliness, waiting times, etc. 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. In a local study (Banek Zorica et al., 2007) students of the Department of Information and Communication Sciences from the University of Zagreb tested libraries whose scope and collection responded to the area of their studies i.e. humanities and social sciences. 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. 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. The improvement of service quality indicated 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.

One of the methodologically most elaborate researches that used students as mystery shoppers was conducted by Kocevar-Weidinger et al. (2010) 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 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. 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 through the evaluation form. 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. 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 2008. 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 LIS students at Stuttgart Media University, who have tested the Stuttgart City Library (Simon et al., 2010). The students organized the whole project, compiled all materials 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.

4. Defining the model

Analyzing the literature and the research covered model of mystery shopping can be defined. In conducting such evaluation method one should follow several key steps: choosing mystery shoppers, informing the staff, defining number of visits and areas of service/library to be evaluated. The last crucial element is definition of further steps and potential changes based on the results of mystery shopping data.

Option for the selection of mystery shoppers should be based on the balance of the finances dedicated to evaluation of services and expertise in the sense of understanding the function and services of non-profit institutions. The obvious solution is to hire a specialized agency has a drawback of allocation of higher amounts of financial resources as the costs tend to be high. Although specialized agencies have the knowledge and methods for tailoring the process for libraries, as research shows, 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 system. This solution could result in two positive effects: firstly, the price of the process is considerably smaller

and secondly, by being involved in the process itself, library staff has the opportunity to step back into the shoes of its users and see library services from a user point of view. The negative side is: in using its own resources, library staff has to invest a considerable amount of time, knowledge and effort into the process together with the analysis and presentation of the gathered data in an appropriate way. Therefore, the most sensible solution would be the new approach to the field in using library and information science 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 the individual researcher or educator who is an expert in the area of user research and the library management of the institutions involved. This way both sides benefit from the process: students 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 bridges 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 implemented such method, both by the library staff and students. Therefore, it can serve as the best utilization of the problem of utilizing such a specific evaluation method as mystery shopping in libraries.

The second very important consideration is that the library staff must be informed or alerted about them, if they are going to be evaluated by mystery shoppers. Research has shown, together with the ESOMAR guidelines, it is crucial to inform the employees about the method being utilized in the certain period of time. Still, exact dates and time should not be disclosed in order to ensure usual everyday practice. On the other hand, research has also shown that it is a good practice to inform staff about the mystery shopping procedures in order to relieve potential staff tensions and 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. 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.

The principles of mystery shopping, gathered from the international and national research, can be gathered around these points:

1) Mystery shopping enables the staff to see their service from a user point of view raising the staff awareness and self-discipline in the workplace;
2) It is a process effective only when implemented during a longer period of time by which the level of service is measured during different time periods;
3) The method and the results of mystery shopping have to be presented to the library staff (the process should be explained in detail in order to avoid possible staff tensions or ethical problems);
4) The results should always be gathered and presented focusing on the process itself rather than individual performance. The results should be used to enhance the service and not to evaluate the staff and actions for improvement should be defined and taken.

Conclusion

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. Still, utilizing methods of mystery shopping in libraries today presents itself as a viable solution in determining the relations with users and user services. The constant budget cuts as well as growing competition in the field of information services are forcing library management to improve effectiveness and competitiveness of library service. In that sense, applying evaluation methods from the business sector seems like obvious choice. By using mystery shopping techniques libraries can gather "real" data on the level of service and customer relations by providing insight from the user point of view. Although research has shown implementation of different approaches the unique denominator is in agreement that mystery shopping presents a very useful method for libraries which should be considered a viable addition to the standard evaluation methods of library service, such as surveys, interviews or focus groups.

References

American Library Association, (2004). *Guidelines for behavioral performance of reference and information service providers*, [Online], Retrieved on 25 March 2012 from
http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=Home&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=26937

Banek Zorica, M. et al., (2007). Student in search for information: mystery shopping in Croatian libraries // Proceedings of the *15th BOBCATSS symposium: marketing of information services,* Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Arts, Prague, 556-557.

Calvert, P., (2005). It's a mystery: mystery shopping in New Zealand's public libraries, *Library Review*, Vol. 54, No. 1, 24-35.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K., (2007). *Research methods in education*. Routledge, London.

ESOMAR, (2005). *ESOMAR world research codes and guidelines: mystery shopping studies*, [Online], Retrieved on 25 March 2012 from http://www.esomar.org/uploads/public/knowledge-and-standards/codes-and-guidelines/ESOMAR_Codes-and-Guidelines_MysteryShopping.pdf

Finn, A. and Kayandé, U., (1999). Unmasking a phantom: a psychometric assessment of mystery shopping, *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 75, No. 2, 195-217.

Kocevar-Weidinger, E. et al., (2010). Why and how to mystery shop your reference desk, *Reference Services Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 28-43.

Morrison, L. J., Colman, A. M. and Preston, C. C., (1997). Mystery customer research: cognitive processes affecting accuracy, *Journal of the Market Research Society*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 349-361.

Shing, M. N. K. and Spence, L. J., (2002). Investigating the limits of competitive intelligence gathering: is mystery shopping ethical?, *Business Ethics: A European Review*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 343-353.

Simon, I. et al., (2010). Mystery shoppers test the reference service in a public library: reasons, methods and results, [Online], Retrieved on 25 March 2012 from http://hdl.handle.net/1889/1250

Hesselink, M., van Iwaarden, J. and van der Wiele, T., (2005). Mystery shopping: a tool to develop insight into customer service provision. *Total Quality Management*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 529–541.

Vogt, H., (2004). *Putting the customer first: managing customer satisfaction*. Bertelsmann Stifftung, Gütersloh.

Wilson, A. M., (2001). Mystery shopping: using deception to measure service performance, *Psychology and Marketing*, Vol. 18, No. 7, 721-734.