



The Intrepid Detective Using Mystery Shops to Uncover What Customers Really Think

So you think you know your residence pretty well? Got a handle on expenses, keep an ear to the ground in terms of competition, have a five-year capital plan? Maybe you've even got a solid marketing plan, traffic's pretty steady and you've got comprehensive management reporting in place so you understand your key quality indicators pretty well. And . . . yet . . . occupancy is slipping, attrition is up and closing ratios are down. What's really going on?

Until you can see your product from your customer's perspective, you haven't really got the whole picture. While your marketing may be first-rate, something about the prospects' experiences in dealing with your residence may be turning them off. You can't possibly judge this without putting yourself in your customer's shoes. Engaging an unbiased third party to conduct a "mystery shop" of your residence can provide you with an unparalleled opportunity to find the obstacles that may be impeding sales. The results will allow you to target areas of weakness and, if implemented correctly, close more deals.

When choosing a mystery shop supplier, choose a company that:

- Has experience directly in the retirement residence industry. They'll know what they're looking for.
- Evaluates the entire customer experience, not just how the salesperson performs. The salesperson's performance is only one part of a large puzzle – albeit an important one. If that's all you're measuring, however, you may miss the fact that your staff is unfriendly, your food service substandard, your building dirty or your receptionist rude. Shop the entire experience, not the one person trying to close the deal.
- Can offer site-specific, divisional and company-wide reporting. Some may even be able to offer bench-marking against the industry as a whole.

- Offers a shop that has both a numeric evaluation scale (for comparison purposes) but also extensive comments. That way, you'll not only know that your site scored 73% in one area, but you'll understand why.
- Has a clear methodology for scoring. No matter who the shopper, the directions should be so explicit that if five different people were to shop one residence, all results should be fairly similar.

Consider shopping your residence at least once per year and possibly more often – if you have a new marketer come onboard or if results of a shop were substandard. You may even want to have your competition shopped periodically in order to gauge how you're doing in comparison.

Remember, perception is reality. Unless you understand your customer's perception of your product, you can never really know the reality of why your occupancy sits where it does.