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Examining the usefulness of mystery shopping to evaluate client care in the veterinary practice

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ABSTRACT: A mystery shopping exercise can provide useful information on how customers view the service they are given by a company. This article examines the usefulness of the mystery shopping exercise within the veterinary practice, what kind of information can be gathered from the exercise, and how this can be used to improve the service that clients of the practice receive.

Mystery shopping is used by many companies throughout the world as a method of assessing the level of customer service skills demonstrated by their staff. Research states that 'the mystery-shopping instrument can be used to stimulate improvements and to measure these improvements' (Hesselink et al., 2004).

Mystery shopping initially involves the management team of the company deciding what parameters and scenarios are to be assessed during the exercise and the method by which the mystery shoppers will contact the company.

Mystery shoppers pose as clients with the purpose of enacting pre-set scenarios and questions. It may be conducted over the phone, via e-mail or through face-to-face contact.

The mystery shopper then provides detailed feedback on how the staff handled each situation, which can in turn be analysed and used to identify areas in which the staff excel and areas in which some improvement is required.

Mystery shopping specific to veterinary practices is available via a number of marketing companies. Some pharmaceutical and pet food companies offer the service too with reference to their products which are stocked and sold by the practice.

Presentation of mystery shopping to staff

Mystery shopping may be presented to staff in a number of ways, including:

- as a competition to see which staff member meets the most targets
- as a training exercise to identify areas in which improvements can be made
- as a planned activity for which staff members receive specific training before the event.

The management team should consider carefully how the exercise should be presented to staff.

If the presentation of the concept of mystery shopping is handled successfully, staff will buy in to the process and take responsibility for the outcome of the assessment. This means that the practice team will be more open to improving on any areas which are identified as weak in the final report.

In order to conform to the Data Protection Act (1998), staff must be informed of the mystery shopping exercise if they are to be recorded in any way. It is beneficial to inform staff of the exercise in advance so that they can identify their own training needs prior to the exercise being carried out. This will also help them to buy in to the process.

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Staff should be giving gold standard service to all clients. Having staff members treat every client as they would a mystery shopper is a useful training tool, because it will ensure that the level of client care remains high at all times, rather than just during a mystery shopping spot check.

Objectivity of mystery shopping

The level of information gathered during a mystery shopping exercise can be determined by the practice management team. This may include feedback on all areas of the client's experience of the practice.

Some of these areas are more open to the subjectivity of the mystery shopper – for example, did the staff member who answered the telephone demonstrate empathy? Other areas can be measured more objectively – for example, did the staff member who answered a telephone call use the name of the practice?

Mystery shoppers are usually trained to elicit the information gathered as objectively as possible and, where more than one of them is used to assess the performance of a company, their approach is standardised prior to the commencement of the exercise.

When considering the use of mystery shopping in the veterinary practice, it is important that a reputable company is used, to ensure the validity of the results which are obtained.

Information gathering

The information to be gathered in a mystery shopping exercise must be

decided prior to the event. There is opportunity to gain extensive information on a number of areas which affect client care – or for the exercise to be very specific to one product sold.

The exercise can include as many members of staff as the practice managers require, and the shift pattern of staff can be supplied to the mystery shopping provider to ensure that the sample taken includes the appropriate staff members.

Many areas of client care can be assessed through mystery shopping. These include:

- greeting of clients on the phone or face to face
- whether or not specific products or services are offered to the client
- how many times the phone rings before it is answered
- how interested and enthusiastic the staff are about the client's pet.

The areas to be assessed will be determined during the planning phase of the mystery-shopping exercise and these will dictate the type of contact with the practice, the number of mystery shoppers who will contact the practice, and the scenarios and questions which are used.

There may be a need for a number of different scenarios to be deployed in order to gather reliable information – for example, assessing whether staff members are following the practice protocol when advising clients on flea and worm control.

A number of different species and age ranges of patients would need to be used in the scenarios to ensure that adherence to the whole protocol is tested fully.

Presentation of the findings

In order for mystery shopping to be a valid marketing activity, the results must be shared with the practice's management and with the employees.

The information gathered by the company which undertakes the mystery shopping on behalf of the practice may be presented in the form of a written or verbal report. This may include suggestions for improvements in the areas which have been assessed alongside the raw data (**Figure 1**).

Some companies offer analysis of the results as an additional service. The report provided can then be used to evaluate the level of care which the mystery shoppers received whilst posing as clients. This report then forms the basis of feedback to staff and an action plan can be drawn up at this stage.

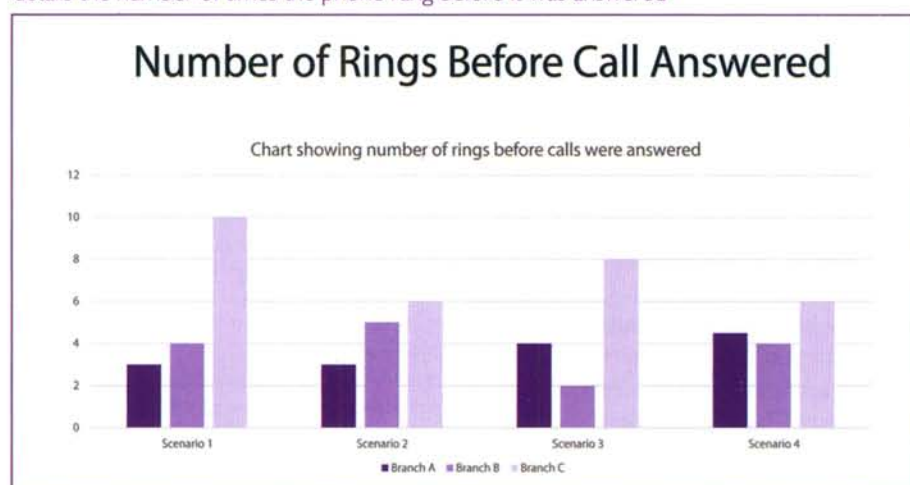
Feedback to staff

The feedback given to staff after a mystery-shopping exercise is the first step towards improving client care. According to Collins and Turner (2005):

- feedback should be given immediately, in order that staff can remember the customer interaction
- staff should be shown visual – or listen to sound recordings – of their performance to reinforce feedback
- staff can be encouraged to take responsibility for their customer care skills by appraising their own performance
- the evaluator should meet face-to-face with the management team to discuss their observations. They may also wish to meet with the team members involved in the mystery shopping exercise too.

Feedback should be followed by rewards for excellent service by staff. According to Cover (2008): 'Good service and improvements in service must be rewarded in order for staff to maintain the level of service', and 'The recognition and reward of good customer service, both before and after a mystery shopping campaign, will encourage employees to continue to perform at the top level, whilst providing others with a strong example or model with which to follow'.

■ **Figure 1.** An example of a chart showing the results of a mystery shopping exercise which details the number of times the phone rang before it was answered



“Mystery shopping can be a useful exercise in assessing client care in a veterinary practice”

Where staff performance has fallen short of the required standard, mystery shopping will identify areas requiring further training, and a specific training programme can be put into place. The mystery shopping exercise may then be repeated at a later date to assess the effectiveness of this training for the staff members involved.

The effect of mystery shopping

Many retailers use mystery shopping as a marketing tool in order to improve customer service and, therefore, profitability. The veterinary practice is no exception to this.

The clientele of a veterinary practice is largely unable to judge the veterinary care that their pet receives and so they judge the practice on the client care that they receive (Figure 2). It is arguably essential to the profitability and, therefore, sustainability of the practice that client care is of a high standard.

Benefits of mystery shopping

The benefits of mystery shopping include:

- it can be tailored to the practice's needs and to individual staff members
- questions and scenarios used can be very specific
- the time frame involved is flexible
- it can be conducted via phone, e-mail or by the mystery shopper attending the practice
- detailed information on the performance of staff is available
- areas where staff training is required can be identified and this can be initiated.

Drawbacks of mystery shopping

The drawbacks of mystery shopping include:

- some of the parameters may be assessed objectively, others are more



Figure 2. The welcome that clients receive in reception is a key part of their experience when visiting the practice and can be assessed by a mystery shopper

subjective – training of the mystery shopper(s) is essential to reduce this

- staff may resent a mystery shopping exercise and may not buy in to the results
- the exercise may incur an expense to the practice.


Summary

The information gathered must be relayed to the relevant staff member(s) as soon as practicable in order to give them the opportunity to remember the client and to reflect on their performance.

Staff should be encouraged to evaluate their own performance in order that they can learn from the mystery shopping exercise.

The use of visual and/or sound recording during the exercise, which is then played back to staff during the feedback process, will assist with the evaluation process and in allowing the staff involved to have a constructive discussion regarding their participation in the exercise.

Staff should receive an incentive or reward for good customer service because this will motivate them to meet client care targets. This will ultimately increase the profitability and sustainability of the practice.

Mystery shopping can be a useful exercise in assessing client care in a veterinary practice. If carefully planned and implemented, it can assist managers in identifying areas of weakness and strength. This assessment can then be used when writing protocols and benchmarks relating to client care. 

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