

Mystery shopper scams

Do you love to shop? If so, you may be tempted by unsolicited emails or newspaper ads that claim you can earn a living as a secret or mystery shopper by dining at elegant restaurants, shopping at pricey stores or checking into luxurious hotels. However, marketers who promise lucrative jobs as mystery shoppers often do not deliver on their promises.

What is mystery shopping?

Some retailers hire marketing research companies to evaluate the quality of service in their stores. These companies use mystery shoppers to get the information anonymously. They assign a mystery shopper to make a particular purchase in a store or restaurant, for example, and then report on the experience. Typically, the shopper is reimbursed and can keep the product or service.

Many professionals in the field consider mystery shopping a part-time activity, at best. And, they add, opportunities generally are posted online by marketing research or merchandising companies.

Nevertheless, fraudulent mystery shopping promoters are using newspaper ads and emails to create the impression that they are a gateway to lucrative mystery shopper jobs with reputable companies. These solicitations usually promote a website where consumers can “register” to become mystery shoppers after they pay a fee for information about a certification program, a directory of mystery shopping companies, or a guarantee of a mystery shopping job.

The truth is that it is unnecessary to pay money to anyone to get into the mystery shopper business. The shopping certifications offered in advertising or unsolicited email are almost always worthless. A list of companies that hire mystery shoppers is available for free and legitimate mystery shopper jobs are on the Internet for free. Consumers who try to get a refund from promoters of mystery shopping jobs usually are out of luck. Either the business does not return the phone calls, or if it does, it is to try another pitch.

Do not wire money

You may have heard about people who are “hired” to be mystery shoppers, and told that their first assignment is to evaluate a money transfer service, like Western Union or MoneyGram. The shopper receives a check with instructions to deposit it in a personal bank account, withdraw the amount in cash, and wire it to a third party. The check is a fake.

By law, banks must make the funds from deposited checks available within days, but uncovering a fake check can take weeks. It may seem that the check has cleared and the money has posted to the account – but when it turns out to be a fake, the person who deposited the check and wired the money will be responsible for paying back the bank.

It is never a good idea to deposit a check from someone you do not know and then wire money back.

The facts of mystery shopping

Becoming a legitimate mystery shopper for a legitimate company does not cost anything. Here is how to do it:

- Search the Internet for mystery shopping companies that are accepting applications. Legitimate companies do not charge an application fee. Many accept applications online.
- Do some homework about mystery shopping. Check libraries or bookstores for tips on how to find companies hiring mystery shoppers, as well as how to do the job effectively.
- Sell “certification.” Companies that use mystery shoppers generally do not require certification.
- Guarantee a job as a mystery shopper.
- Charge a fee for access to mystery shopping opportunities.
- Ask you to deposit a check and then wire some or all of the money to another person or business.

You can visit the Mystery Shopping Providers Association (MSPA North America) website at www.mysteryshop.org for information on how to register to be a mystery shopper with a MSPA-member company, a database of available jobs, and additional information on the industry in general. The MSPA also offers optional certification programs for a fee.

Be aware that some illegitimate mystery shopper promoters are using the MSPA or MSPA member logos in their materials in order to appear to be affiliated with MSPA. Check a company against the MSPA member company list on the MSPA website.

Consumers should be skeptical of mystery shopping promoters who:

- Advertise for mystery shoppers in a newspaper’s ‘help wanted’ section or by email. While it may appear as if these companies are hiring mystery shoppers, it is much more likely that they are pitching unnecessary and possibly bogus mystery shopping “services.”

- Sell directories of companies that provide mystery shoppers.

For more information or to file a complaint, visit our website or contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection.

**Bureau of Consumer Protection
2811 Agriculture Drive
PO Box 8911
Madison WI 53708-8911**

**E-MAIL:
DATCPHotline@wisconsin.gov**

**WEBSITE:
datcp.wisconsin.gov**

**Toll-free in WI:
(800) 422-7128**

(608) 224-4976

FAX: (608) 224-4677

TTY: (608) 224-5058

(Information taken from FTC fact sheet “Mystery Shopper Scams”, 06/12)

I:\cpcic\facts\MysteryShopperScams472 07/15