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The Mystery Shoppers Guide to Becoming a Mystery Shopper
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How to Get Started as a Mystery Shopper

If you’ve never mystery shopped before, you may think you need to have the “right connections” or a lot of luck to land a great job like mystery shopping. After all, people don’t just hand out jobs that require little training and unbelievably flexible hours, where you can pick and choose which assignments you want to work on... Except they do just hand them out, and YOU can be a mystery shopper, too!

It may sound ridiculously easy and too good to be true. The truth is that there is a little bit of work required to get started, but no more so than with any other job. It’s possible to get signed up with several mystery shopping providers in just a few hours.

It’s Easy To Apply. First, as with any job, you want to research which companies you should work for. If you’re looking for a part-time job, you don’t just walk into the first store or office you see. You probably will ask some friends if they enjoy working at their company first. Mystery shopping is only slightly different. You definitely want to research which mystery shopping providers you work for to ensure the company pays well, has good assignments, and so forth. Message boards are a good spot to find this information. But unlike with other jobs, you actually want to sign up with multiple companies to increase the number of shops you are assigned to. I’ve included some links to companies in the email I sent you.

To sign up to work for a provider is as simple as logging on to their website and completing their on-line application. As with any other job, some applications are just a few questions, and some are much more in-depth with essay questions and quizzes. You may be tempted to skimp on the quality of your answers after you’ve applied to a few companies, but you don’t want to do this. Make sure every application you complete is professional and free of misspellings and grammatical errors. Treat this application as you would any other professional job application.

In most cases, you will be approved as a shopper without issue, and you’ll move on to the next step.
And Now, To Find A Shop Assignment. Mystery shop assignments generally are assigned in one of two ways. First, you have the self-assign shops. As a new mystery shopper with no prior experience, the majority of the shops you work on initially will be self-assign shops. Use this type of shop to gain experience and increase your shopper rating by doing a good job on your shops.

As a new mystery shopper, you can qualify for the other type of shop, which are shops you must apply for and wait for a response to see if that shop has been assigned to you. The shops are assigned by a scheduler who works for the provider. Schedulers typically will first assign a shop to shoppers that have a higher shopper rating and to shoppers they have worked with successfully in the past. This means that as a new shopper, you are at the end of the line for qualifying for these shops. However, it doesn’t mean you won’t get them. There is no harm done at all in applying, so go ahead and apply. Just keep in mind that these shops are harder for a new shopper to come by initially, so try not to get frustrated if you aren’t assigned to them at first.

After you get a few successfully completed shops under your belt, you will soon see that you are offered and assigned more shops, and your income will become steadier. Providers will even call you personally to request that you complete shops for them!

You can apply to work with a provider in as little as an hour or less, and in many cases you will be approved that same day. As soon as you are approved with a provider, you can search through the available jobs and apply on-line for them. It’s possible and entirely realistic that you could be working as a mystery shopper in as little as one day!

How to Fill Out a Mystery Shopping Application

You hear about it all the time. A shopper’s application for a new provider got rejected. She’s
been racking her brain trying to figure out why. The applications require some pretty specific personal information, such as age and income level. Perhaps it was one of those things that affected the shopper’s approval…

What They’re Looking For. Companies who hire mystery shopping providers typically want a shopper that fits squarely into the profile of their average shopper. Age, height, and even household income level are all used by providers to match you with the companies they do business with. For instance, a shop for an upscale woman’s clothing store probably wouldn’t need a male shopper with a low income level. Sure, a lower income male may walk into the store at some point, but he’s not their typical customer and wouldn’t easily blend in as a regular shopper in the store.

Just the same, a shop that requires the purchase of a video game may not be good fit for a 70-year old woman. And a restaurant shop that requires an alcohol purchase may not be a fit for a young adult who isn’t legally old enough to purchase alcohol.

Typically, a provider will have more than enough different types of shops to have a need for almost any type of shopper. Provided the application was completed correctly, most shoppers will be approved without problem. There are times, however, when a provider may not have a need for your shopper profile. If you do get turned down, don’t worry too much about it. There are literally hundreds of providers you can sign up with. Just hold your chin up and move on.

So Many Rejections! If you find that your applications are repeatedly being rejected and you’re sensing a pattern, you may want to review your responses more carefully. It may have nothing to do with your age or income level and everything to do with your answers on the application.

On the essay-style questions on the application, you may want to write your responses in a Word document first to check your spelling and grammar. Then cut and paste them into the application when you’re sure your answers are perfect. Writing ability plays such a big part in mystery shopping. Most shops have some type of free-writing or essay-style questions in the report, and schedulers don’t want to spend all of their time editing your reports. They are looking for shoppers who can complete the reports correctly and free of grammatical and spelling errors.
Also consider your responses on questions pertaining to why you want to be a mystery shopper and why you think you’ll be a good mystery shopper. In your responses, consider all the qualities of a good mystery shopper – a strong writer, detail-oriented, responsible and able to meet deadlines. Consider reasons other than making money that you want to be a mystery shopper. Do you want to help retailers improve customer service? Do you want your voice as a consumer to be heard? A response to why you want to be a mystery shopper probably shouldn’t say that you are buried up to your ears in debt and need to make some extra money to put shoes on your twelve kids. Keep your responses professional and write them to suit your audience.

With so many providers to work with, a couple of rejections here and there aren’t a big deal. Just move on to the next one. But if you sense a pattern, see if it’s something you’re saying on the application that may be the problem.

**Easy Ways to Find Assignments in Your Area**

A common question asked by both new and experienced mystery shoppers alike is how to find shops in their own little part of the world. With mystery shoppers’ travel costs going up as the cost of gas rises, many mystery shoppers want to remain fairly close to home when doing mystery shop assignments. Rural mystery shoppers often have difficulty locating shops in their own small town or nearby towns. Likewise, shoppers in major metropolitan areas may enjoy many mystery shop assignments in their town and surrounding suburbs. However, they may not want to fight traffic for assignments across town and may only want to complete assignments within a 10 or 15 mile radius of their home.

Is there an easy way to find mystery shop assignments in your area? Absolutely!

Use The Web! One of the favorite sites of experienced mystery shoppers is jobslinger.com.
This website compiles mystery shop assignments from numerous mystery shop providers, providing you with one easy location to search for and find shop assignments. It’s easy to register for the site, and there are no fees associated with registering or obtaining jobs. There are jobs posted on this site for locations across the country, and you can easily search for jobs by location.

This site compiles jobs from volition.com, SASSIE, DemoZilla, and the MSPA, so there is no need to spend your valuable time searching through job postings on so many websites when you can do a quick search at just one website.

WAIT....There Are More! While jobslinger.com conveniently encompasses many of the mystery shop providers, it is not a catch-all. You may need to do some additional research into other shop providers out there in your neck of the woods, especially if your neck of the woods is off the beaten path. The number of shop providers you should register for has been suggested at anywhere from 10 to 75 or more. However, if you use some common sense and devote some time into researching providers before you register for them, you may save yourself quite a bit of time. Registering for a handful of providers who you know have assignments in your area is far better than registering for twenty or more providers who rarely or never have assignments near you.

The Power of the People. Mystery shoppers are a very open and supportive group of individuals. Most shoppers are more than happy to help out a fellow shopper in need. Use online forums and discussion groups to post specific questions you have about a mystery shop provider or about assignments in the specific location you are in. While it may seem counter-intuitive for a mystery shopper who is busy in their own part of the world to share his or her secrets of success with other shoppers, there are usually more than enough shop assignments to go around from the hundreds of shop providers across the nation. So use your (human) resources to get the information you need to find more and better shops.

The bottom line is to do some research into shop providers. While it may be tempting to put all of your eggs in one basket like jobslinger.com, it may be worth your while to branch out and find some less trafficked shop providers who aren’t associated with jobslinger.com yet. Use the web and your fellow mystery shoppers to get the insight and knowledge you need to
find more and better mystery shop assignments near you.

**Tips for New Shoppers**

If you are like most new mystery shoppers, you jump into the business with very little idea of what to expect. You know nobody who can show you the ropes of mystery shopping, and you don’t have anyone you can really call to get answers to your questions. If you are new to the mystery shopping scene, don’t stress! Here’s what you need to know to get a great start in this new and exciting business:

Read The Requirements. Each assignment you complete will have a list of requirements. Some requirements are just a few pages, while some are far longer. You can opt to be an environmentally-friendly mystery shopper and just read the assignment requirements on the computer screen. However, most mystery shoppers will print out the requirements for easier reading the first time around, and also to take with them and refresh their memory before they enter the store. Whatever method you prefer to do, make sure you have read through the assignment requirements and fully understand what you need to do on the job before you step foot in the job site location. It is highly advisable that you do print out the requirements to read through another time in the privacy of your car both before and after your site visit. Many mystery shoppers have been known to jot down notes to a few of the answers in a concealed location in their cars at the job site before leaving the parking lot. If you do keep the assignment requirements in your car, be sure they are concealed from folks passing by your car who may glance in your window, and make sure the store staff can’t see you from the window.

Get A Calendar. Whether you use a traditional hanging calendar, a desktop calendar, or a more high-tech calendar on your computer or hand-held device, make sure you use one! You may be the king or queen of organization, putting all of your to-do items in your head and keeping track of them the old-fashioned way. However, mystery shopping adds another
dimension to your schedule. With each assignment you request, you will need to ensure you have the time to travel to and from the location, conduct the site visit, and return home to complete the online report.

Double-booking or overbooking is a common occurrence with newer mystery shoppers. While it may sound easy to simply cancel an assignment you don’t have time to complete, canceling out on assignments can leave a ding in your shopper rating and result in loss of assignments and income for you in the future. So it’s best to be safe and organize your schedule with a calendar.

Use Your Resources. Mystery shopping can feel like a very isolated job. You don’t have a manager hovering over your shoulder. You don’t have co-workers gossiping about the latest policy changes near the water cooler. Yet in a traditional job, your supervisor and co-workers are also a source of information and support for you, and this vital support is seemingly not available in mystery shopping. Fortunately, this is not true! Mystery shoppers gather together in online forums to discuss and debate the latest issues and challenges they face. You can get answers to your questions, or even simply just vent about your day’s work to people who understand. If you aren’t using the online mystery shopping forums now, make some time to check them out.

Mystery shopping can be a confusing job initially, but you will get the hang of it in no time!

Tips for Making More Money as a Mystery Shopper

From the full-time mystery shopper to the mystery shopper who picks up a few occasional assignments each month, every one wants to find ways to make more money. The reality of the gloomy economy has long since hit, and mystery shoppers everywhere and thankful to have mystery shopping as a source of their main income or additional income they can rely on. But if you are looking for ways to make even more money as a mystery shopper (and who isn’t!), here are a few things you can do:
Branch Out. You may feel like there is simply not enough time or opportunity to make additional money as a mystery shopper. You may not see additional assignments posted on the job boards, or the assignments that are posted aren’t assignments you want to take on or that work around your already busy schedule. There is no need to wait for your same old types of assignments that you’ve been working on for months and months to pop up on the job boards again. Instead, sign up with a few additional providers. Keep in mind that there are literally hundreds of providers out there who are looking for mystery shoppers to complete their assignments each and every day. While not all providers will have opportunities in your areas, it’s a fair bet that you aren’t working with ALL of the mystery shopping providers who have jobs in your area.

Look Again. Also take a second look at the providers you are already working for. Really read through the jobs that are posted again. Perhaps there are a few assignments you have been passing over out of habit that really don’t sound so bad after all. What may have sounded like a dud assignment initially may not sound so bad when you are in need of some additional cash. Or perhaps other mystery shoppers such as yourself have also been passing over these same assignments, and the provider has added bonus pay to sweeten the offer.

Write Off Your Mileage. If you aren’t writing off your mileage as a mystery shopper, the bottom line is that you are losing money on every assignment. The IRS requires that you report your income as a mystery shopper to them, but you are allowed to write-off expenses related to mystery shopping. One of the biggest, recurring expenses related to mystery shopping is mileage. For every two miles you drive, you can write off over $1 of the income you will earn on your next assignment. In many cases, you will find that when you write off your mileage, the income you earn is largely or even completely tax-free. On some occasions, you may even find that you can report a “tax loss” on your income, meaning doing the assignment will save you money on taxes on your other sources of income, such as your regular job. So you can see that this adds up in a huge tax savings at the end of the year! And the only thing you need to do to take advantage of that tax savings is to jot down your mileage for each assignment you complete in a handy notebook.

Extra money is just waiting for you to take advantage of, in the form of tax savings from your
business-related expenses and in new mystery shopping providers and assignments ready to give you additional work. Take advantage of these sources to start making (and keeping) more money as a mystery shopper!

How To Tell if A Mystery Shopping Assignment Is A Waste of Time

After you have completed even a handful of mystery shopping assignments, you likely have developed the understanding that mystery shopping can cost your money just as it can make you money. There are a number of hidden costs associated with mystery shopping that many new mystery shoppers fail to take into account, such as the travel costs and the non-reimbursed portion of a required purchase. After you take these costs into account on some assignments, you may save money simply by staying at home. Before you sign up for any mystery shopping assignments, be sure to do a quick analysis of the assignment first.

Travel Costs. This can be one of the most costly hidden expenses of any assignment, but it’s very easy to calculate the cost if you take a minute or two. Use an online mapping tool to calculate the mileage between the assignment site and where you will be traveling from (typically your home or office). Then take the average miles per gallon of your car and divide that by the number of miles to the job site. This gives you the approximate gallons of gas it will take you to drive to the site. Be sure to multiple the figure by two to get a round-trip estimate of gas consumption. Finally, take that figure and multiply it by the cost of a gallon of gas in your area. This is your travel cost.

Required Purchases. New mystery shoppers may be fooled by the assignment requirements when it comes to required purchases. Often, an assignment requires a minimum purchase of $5 or $10, or a minimum purchase of 5 or 10 items. You may think you will buy an item that is exactly $5, or you may purchase the cheapest five items you can find. And this is where most new mystery shoppers stop this line of thought. Unfortunately, when you get to the store, you
may find the cheapest thing at the store is $10 or $15, or you may find that those five cheap items you planned on buying ended up costing you $12.

If you don’t know specifically what you plan to buy at the store and what the item costs, take a minute to research the store’s merchandise online. If you find that a store’s cheapest item is $15, and only $5 is reimbursed, you can see that you will have a loss of $10 on the required purchase.

Do The Math. Take into account all of the areas of payment, such as the shop pay, bonus pay, and reimbursement for purchases. Then subject all of the costs of the assignment. The result is your net profit or net loss for doing the assignment. Keep in mind the 45 minutes to possibly two hours or longer it may take you to do the assignment, including the time to travel, the site visit, and the report. Then you can very quickly calculate the payment per hour to see if the assignment is worth your valuable time.

It’s Not Always What It Seems. If you end up with a very low end result on your total payment calculation, or even if you end up with a net loss, you may still want to take the assignment on. Keep in mind that all assignments are not equal. Some assignments may require you to purchase a frivolous and unnecessary item, such as a pair of earrings or a cigar. Other assignments may require a purchase of an item you were going to make anyway, such as food or gas. If the assignment is for a purchase you were going to make anyway, it is definitely a job worth taking as the payment will supplement a part of your regular expenses.

Also, keep in mind that you can write off your travel expenses on your taxes. This is a bonus you won’t see until tax day, but it is worth taking into considering.

It may seem a bit complicated to make this calculation at first, but if you make a habit of calculating this on each assignment, you will ensure that you never lose money as a mystery shopper. After you get used to the calculation, it will be something you can do very quickly and easily.
How to Get a Paycheck To Be Proud Of

With a normal 9-5 job, there are hidden costs of working such as business lunches, a “second wardrobe” of business attire, and the expense of your commute. As with any other job, there are unreimbursed costs associated with mystery shopping, too.

These can include the cost of required purchases (some of which may be non-returnable), travel-related expenses, and even the cost of having a home office with a computer, internet access, and fax machine.

Most new shoppers are often surprised by the expenses associated with mystery shopping. They are not expecting these hidden expenses to eat away at their profits. Some shoppers may even feel like mystery shopping is not worth the effort.

The key to getting a paycheck you can be proud of is turning these expenses around and making them work in your favor.

On the road again. As with unreimbursed business expenses from any other job, the expenses associated with mystery shopping can also be written off on your tax return. Unless you are doing a phone shop, there is inevitably some travel cost related to each shop that you do. Let’s say you sign up to do a $20 shop that is 30 miles away.

That is 60 miles round-trip. In a typical car that gets 20 miles per gallon, you are eating up 3 gallons of gas to make the shop. With gas prices hovering close to $4 per gallon in many parts of the country now, that $20 shop just cost you $12 in travel costs alone.

You thought you were getting $20 profit from the shop, and in reality you are only getting $8. Experienced shoppers always take into account the cost of travel before applying for a shop.

When taking into consideration the cost of the travel, it is also important to take into account the amount of this expense you can write off on your taxes each year.

The IRS will currently allow you to write off $.505 per mile. So on that 60 mile shop, you can
write off $30.30 on your taxes. Yes, you can write off more than the full amount of pay you received for the job. So in this example, you actually come out farther ahead by keeping track of your mileage! It may seem like a lot to write off, but this is how the IRS also credits you for the wear and tear and other maintenance costs you incur from using your car for business purposes.

You can take advantage of this by simply keeping a log book in your car and recording the mileage for each trip. It is highly recommended that you track all of your trips rather than just the ones that are further away. Those 5 and 10 mile trips will add up over the course of a year. This will equate to a big tax write-off when you file your taxes.

Of course, to avoid or limit travel expenses, you can consider taking shops much closer to home or doing phone shops.

Time is money. We’ve all heard this old cliché, but it could not be more true. Let’s face it, our time is valuable and we want to be paid for our time. We have all heard stories of shoppers who sign up for a shop and end up spending 1-2 hours on a shop that only pays $10 and that has a tremendous amount of paperwork required.

Read through each assignment carefully and try to gauge the amount of time it will require you to actually complete the shop. Is it a matter of you simply walking into the store and doing a quick purchase? Or do you need to review all of the displays, interact with the salesperson for so many minutes, and then complete a 50-question form? If you are required to make a purchase – particularly one that you do not need, are you only allowed to return that item no sooner than 24 hours later? If so, there is additional time involved in terms of the travel back to the store as well as the time to return the merchandise.

Be sure you understand the true time-cost of the shop and make sure you believe the pay is worth the time commitment involved. If not, pass over that shop and wait for either bonus pay or the next shop posted. Taking assignment that you feel have adequate compensation will make you a happier shopper in the long-run.

I want that! The majority of shops have a required purchase, with a minimum dollar amount for that purchase. Many shops will allow you to return an item, but often only after so many hours or days.
Be sure you read the fine print on the required purchase and refund policy before you commit to the job. If it is not an item you were planning on purchasing anyway, be sure you will be allowed to return it. Or otherwise, consider the cost of selling an unwanted item on eBay or in some other way. You may not be able to get the full amount back from re-selling it, but at least you would be getting some portion of it refunded.

You can also considering using these non-returnable purchases to buy early holiday and birthday presents. You are going to need to buy them at some point anyway, so why not make a few bucks for purchasing them?

Some shops, such as grocery shops and gas stations, may be worth your efforts even without a purchase reimbursement.

For instance, a $10 required and non-refunded purchase at a grocery store where the total shop pay is $20 is probably a good deal. You probably spend more than $10 at the grocery store on any given week anyway, so you are simply getting the $20 shop pay for doing something you normally would be doing anyway.

The required purchase and the return policy on that purchase are important aspects of the shop. The purchase can directly eat away at your profit, so be sure to check the shop requirements before you sign up.

Hidden expense or hidden treasure? It may seem like a hassle to keep track of all of the other hidden expenses of mystery shopping – such as internet, fax machines, and basic office supplies. However, keeping a monthly log of all expenses pertaining to your mystery shopping jobs will pay off on tax day.

Just keep in mind that you can only write off the portion of the expense that is used for your mystery shopping business. This may seem like an arbitrary figure for some items such as internet, so you will want to check with an accountant before filing your taxes.

The key to being a satisfied mystery shopper and enjoying your paycheck is to read the fine print in the shop requirements and truly understand the “cost” of doing the shop.

But don’t stop there! Be sure to use those hidden costs of the job to work in your favor. Experienced mystery shoppers make the shops work for them.
Filling Out a Fast and Accurate Mystery Shopping Report

With mystery shopping, as with many parts of life, the adage “time is money” holds true. The more assignments you can fit into your busy schedule, the money you can make. Yet when you complete a hasty report, it can have negative consequences – often opening up time-consuming questions from your scheduler. Or worse yet, you could have holes in your report that lead the scheduler to not pay you for the work you completed.

If you want to make more money as a mystery shopper (and who doesn’t?), here are a few tips for completing a fast and accurate report:

What’s The Question Again? You can’t type out a fast answer if you don’t know the question. More often than not, problems on a report arise when mystery shoppers don’t answer the question that was asked. So read through each question in full rather than skimming over it, and then formulate your answer.

There is a fine line between providing too much information and too little information. Somewhere between the two lies the answer you need to provide. If you’ve had a problem on past reports in providing too much or too little information, take a few extra minutes on your next couple of reports and really nail down your answers. After you get the hang of determining that “just right” middle ground on the amount of detail in your responses, your reports going forward will flow more easily.

Take Notes. You can waste some serious time trying to answer questions you don’t know or remember the answers to. So first, read through the report before you head to your site visit. Know what questions you’ll need to answer so you can make mental notes on your site visit.

For concrete details, such as names, times, and so on, feel free to retreat to a bathroom or fitting room to jot down a few notes that you may have trouble recollecting later at home. Or if you use a video recording device, simply make sure you have the audio of the details recorded.
in some fashion. You can even call your own voice mail and leave yourself a somewhat coded message. For instance, if you met with the salesperson James at 3:50, simply leave yourself a voice message saying, Hey, it’s me. It’s about 3:50, and I wanted to let you know I spoke with James about dinner tonight, and he’s up for it. Talk to you later!” If you do the cell phone tactic, you can only record at most one or two messages within earshot of the same person before it starts sounding a little fishy.

Pay attention to the areas of filing a report that are slowing you down or causing you trouble. Whether you feel that you lose time by answering the questions slowly or you lose time by playing a game of “20 Questions” with your scheduler after you file the report, there are things you can do to increase your reporting speed and free up time to make more money mystery shopping!