

Secrets to Growing a Successful Restaurant Franchise

The Director of Training for a 13-location and growing farm-to-table restaurant shares insights on how to use secret shopping to build a customer service culture

Presented by Mystery Shopper Services

This is conversation with the director of training for a successful restaurant franchise about maintaining a great service culture as you grow. In 2000, one of the first successful farm-to-table establishments opened in a small Southern town. The company quickly grew from 40 to 1,000 employees and opened 13 locations across the Southeast. Company leaders advocate secret shopping and have learned a lot about how to use shop data for customer service training that uses positive reinforcement.

The Director of Training, says, "People come for the food but they stay for the service." He's found that service, food, and atmosphere are the three most important success factors. Monthly secret shops at all 13 locations help company leaders teach and reinforce their values and what they've learned about keeping customers satisfied.

How did you turn secret shopping data into a positive versus a negative with staff?

When we were still a young business, our floor managers would receive secret shop information, and when it was negative, they would post the feedback and server's name in the server alley. The staff felt berated and embarrassed. The server's response was to memorize the secret shop questions and "right" responses, which turned our wait staff into robots.

As we grew, we saw secret shops as a tool for getting a second set of eyes on the overall functioning of each location as well as generating information to inform training and coaching programs. Our purpose with secret shopping is to understand what guests are seeing not what managers are saying. It's knowledge we can pass on to our staff in a positive manner.

We decided to provide secret shop data only to senior operators and regional managers. The shop reports give them a snapshot of what's taking place. With that information, they can take proper action with a training and coaching approach.

Are your monthly secret shop questions always the same?

No. One of the reasons we like mystery shopping is the flexibility. We move questions around and change scoring often. We can quickly access data at-a-glance or in reports for a deep dive on your web portal. Your service is quick and helpful. The web access is very easy. Both factors keep us coming back.

How do you decide what information to capture through secret shops?

All our questions are focused on the service steps that satisfy guests. For example, if a lack of or poor greeting shows up in the data, managers will know that how to properly greet guests should be covered again in training. Ensuring our host staff greets everyone with a smile and pleasantries, whether on the phone or walking in the door, is imperative. We incorporate shortcomings identified by secret shoppers into training for hosts, line cooks, servers, and other positions as needed.

Share your secrets to restaurant success that can be incorporated into secret shopping programs.

We find that people come for the food but stay for the service. So, we focus on the consistent, high-quality, fresh ingredients that made us successful and the customer service and general atmosphere we've learned keeps people happy and coming back.

Easy, enjoyable guest-staff interaction is vital. All people want to feel welcome, treated like family. They also expect excellent service at the table. We emphasize service quality across all customer-facing staff. After the sense of being welcomed, people expect a great atmosphere and quality food.

How do you define server quality?

A lack of server efficiency is what drives people crazy. Diners want efficient and friendly servers that keep their table clean. People tend to have three key expectations:

- Drinks refilled readily
- Clean silverware
- Server availability (not hovering)

From a training standpoint, we teach servers to anticipate what a guest needs versus asking a lot of questions. It's what we call silent service. For example, if the plate is pushed to the side, take it. Dirty silverware from the first course should be removed and replaced before the next course is served. A server should clean and prep the table around a customer without asking them or interrupting conversation while in the process.

How do you achieve quality atmosphere and environment?

Everything from the server's attire to the bathrooms and floors should be neat and tidy. Bathroom cleanliness is a challenge in high-volume restaurants where you have 300 people coming and going from a restroom. Each employee is expected to take responsibility for the condition of our bathrooms. The hosts and server assistants are tasked with timed checks throughout their shift. Scaling up a restaurant business is tricky. One of the toughest aspects is maintaining the culture and quality that made a place popular to begin with. Secret shops can play an important role in utilizing positive reinforcement to preserve and enhance a customer service culture.