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Mystery Shoppers Detect Problems for Restaurants

By JUNE R. HEROLD

It's dinner time. Bob Welcher and an associate walk into a popular campus-area pizza restaurant. They shouldn't have to wait too long to be served. The college students aren't back yet, and the place is practically empty.

After they wait five minutes for someone to greet them, let alone take their order, a bartender nods toward a menu board and says, "Order from here."

No one walks over to take drink orders. So Welcher steps up to the bar, orders a gin and tonic and a draft beer. The cocktail arrives in a white wine goblet with a dried-out piece of lemon plopped in too much gin and too little tonic. The beer arrives in sad shape too. It has no head.

... a mystery shopper caught one bad habit that would have cost \$2,400 a year."

They order a submarine sandwich and a 12-inch pizza. Fifteen minutes later the sub is served. About 30 minutes later a waiter plunks the pizza down, serving it in a broken-down carryout box. By the time Welcher and his associate climb back into Welcher's car, one hour and 20 minutes have passed. Welcher whips out a voice-activated tape recorder, and the two regurgitate everything from the bartender's over-pouring-of the beer to the restaurant's unkempt, dirty restroom. Back at the office, the staff enters their report into the computer that produces a detailed report that scores the restaurant's facility, service

These sleuths solve mystery of poor service

staff and food products.

These gentlemen aren't health inspectors or liquor control agents. They aren't spying on a competitor either. The pizza chain hired them to check out the restaurant's service and daily operations.

The service offered by Welcher's Columbus company, Restaurant Consultants, Inc. is known as "mystery shopping." It's a service that enables business owners to evaluate anonymously their facility, customer service and food products. Many restaurants use mystery shopping programs. Restaurant Consultants, Inc. program is designed as a management training tool to motivate service staff to improve customer service and sell more effectively. They're also designed as an incentive/reward program to provide positive motivation.

An independent shopping service can cost anywhere from about \$75 per visit to about \$150 a visit, depending on what kind of restaurant - quick service or full-service - and how many times a mystery shopper visits the restaurant per month. Shopper's are paid a fee and are reimbursed for their expenses during the shop.

Mystery shopping's beginnings are traced back to the first private investigator hired by a tavern owner to watch bartenders handle cash. The service, however, is not meant to patrol wrongdoing these days. It's meant to improve the operation's service and efficiency. It's also meant to monitor bartenders and servers suggestive selling techniques and obligate them to fulfill their job description by selling high-profit menu items including appetizers, soups, salads and desserts. These "add-on" sales can

amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars in increased sales per year.

"Operators must monitor bartenders' pouring habits," Welcher said. If a cocktail has too much liquor, it costs the owner, he said. And if beers are poured without heads, that's easily 20 to 30 percent of your beer sales given away." The cost of a beer is calculated to account for a foamy head, which in the bar business is known as "pure profit."

Why hire mystery shoppers? Well, if business owners want to know what goes on when they're not tending the shop, a mystery shopper will find out. "When I'm in the bar, I get a false impression," says Vincent Del Chicco, owner of Vinny's Pub and Slapsy Maxie's.

"They (his employees) tuck their shirts in. They jump to attention. They clean tables and sell products. But when I'm gone, they go back to their bad habits."

At Del Chicco's pub, a mystery shopper caught one bad habit that could have cost Del Chicco about \$2,400 a year. One of the pub's bartenders habitually gave free beers to buddies who stopped by to see him. While the bartender thought it was good public relations for the bar, Del Chicco found himself losing about 20 cases of beer, or \$204 a month in sales.

Not all mystery shopping services watch bartending and food preparation techniques. Instead they hire average consumers to evaluate customer service and product presentation, the parts of the business the ordinary customer sees. But some, like Restaurant Consultants, Inc., hire bartenders or food service experts to survey restaurant operations.