

FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Division of Consumer & Business Education

The Secrets of Mystery Shopping Revealed

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. But, according to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the nation's consumer protection agency, marketers who promise lucrative jobs as mystery shoppers often do not deliver bona fide opportunities.

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're 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 certification offered in advertising or unsolicited email is 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 doesn't return the phone calls, or if it does, it's to try another pitch.

The Facts of Mystery Shopping

Becoming a legitimate mystery shopper for a legitimate company doesn't cost anything. Here's how to do it:

- Search the Internet for mystery shopping companies that are accepting applications. Legitimate companies don't 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.

You can visit the Mystery Shopping Providers Association (MSPA) 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 certification programs for a fee.

In the meantime, the FTC says 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’s much more likely that they’re pitching unnecessary — and possibly bogus — mystery shopping “services.”
- 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.
- Sell directories of companies that provide mystery shoppers.

If you think you have encountered a mystery shopping scam, file a complaint with your local consumer protection agency, the Better Business Bureau, your State Attorney General, or the FTC.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters consumer complaints into the Consumer Sentinel Network, a secure online database and investigative tool used by hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

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