

Mystery Shopping the Patient Experience

A TBI white paper with Kristin Baird, Baird Consulting
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Dedicated to improving
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Mystery Shopping the Patient Experience

CONSUMERISM IS HERE TO STAY. Cost and quality transparency will create a level playing field in healthcare. The key driver of patient satisfaction and financial success will be customer service. Patients will increasingly choose hospitals where they have positive experiences; and many positive experiences create lasting relationships. The question is, “How do you create as many positive experiences as possible?”

In an era when consumers increasingly view healthcare as a commodity to be comparison-shopped and evaluated, healthcare providers feel escalating pressure to ensure that they’re providing what consumers expect. However, there is evidence that suggests the issues that are important to consumers aren’t necessarily the issues of focus for hospitals and physicians.

Healthcare organizations present an array of marketing promises assuring consumers “excellent, convenient, quality care.” At what points in their encounters do consumers expect the fulfillment of those promises? The answer to this question is all of them.

That moment when consumers determine whether or not providers are living up to their promises is the moment of truth. Such moments of truth occur many times before consumers even see a physician face-to-face or undergo a single test or treatment. Moments of truth occur as consumers navigate the provider’s Web site, as they call to schedule an appointment and even as they use the restroom at the provider’s location. In fact, every encounter along the consumer’s experience pathway is a unique opportunity for the provider to instill confidence in the organization or destroy trust.

To today’s savvy consumers, mission statements and brand promises of compassion, convenience, care and access are much more than pretty words on the wall; they are a guarantee of what to expect. Healthcare organizations that make such public promises need to be ready to live up to them during each and every moment of truth because today’s consumers are increasingly likely to vote with their feet.

The fortunate providers are those whose consumers openly tell them that they are taking their business elsewhere and give their reasons for doing so. In such cases, those providers have an opportunity to use that information to shift their brand promises to be more in line with consumer expectations or improve services to meet the brand promise. In the real world, however, consumers rarely give that kind of feedback. More likely, they silently move on after their expectations go unmet. This is especially true of the consumers who never even get as far as making an appointment or walking through the front door, due to unmet expectations online or over the phone.

The Beryl Institute white paper, **It's Not Just a Call, It's a Customer**, quantified the monetary value of lost calls¹. This paper also validated that 75% of people who abandon calls do not call back. Consider the bottom line impact of this fact. Many organizations have the ability to measure abandonment rate at the switchboard, but what about the abandonment rate at the department or service line level? When providers list phone numbers for individual service lines and departments, they have offered an open invitation for consumers to call for information and appointments. At that point, the encounter is up for grabs. Who is answering the phone? What standards have been set for handling inbound calls? Are the employees who are answering phones knowledgeable about services and prepared to answer questions? Are they willing to spend time with a caller or is the call an interruption of their 'real work'? Answering these questions can help providers understand more about crucial encounters. But how do providers get to the bottom of these moments of truth?

In one assessment of 300 new patient calls to various outpatient departments listed in the Yellow Pages, callers found that attendants (the term used for the person answering the call) were often unprepared to answer simple questions related to the service line. Equally disconcerting, over 50% of the attendants answering the calls could not offer information about the organization's other services even though they were clearly represented on the hospital web site and in published marketing materials. In the same assessment, only 14% of the attendants followed the organizations phone standards.

1. It's Not Just a Call, It's a Customer, *The Beryl Institute* p.2

Introducing Mystery Shoppers

Widely used for years by banks, restaurants and hotels, mystery shopping has exploded on the healthcare scene in recent years. Although most healthcare organizations use surveys to measure patient satisfaction, such data doesn't include the voice of the consumer who never gets beyond the first phone call. Many of these potential customers never become your patients because they have written you off at the first encounter. Mystery shopping can fill in very important information from a group that isn't represented in patient satisfaction surveys - the pre-visit consumer.

Healthcare mystery shoppers are educated, experienced consumers who anonymously evaluate the customer experience with healthcare organizations and individual providers. They are often selected to represent the demographics of the region and are trained to observe specific details during their healthcare encounters and use specific criteria to evaluate those details. They are trained to write informative narratives that describe emotional responses to the experience. Mystery shoppers don't just uncover problem areas; they also identify the elements that contribute to a positive patient experience. The wealth of information uncovered by mystery shoppers allows organizations to continually evolve their delivery of healthcare service to meet and exceed consumer expectations.

Because of this ability to produce a true-to-life picture of a customer's experience, mystery shopping is rapidly becoming a must-have tool in patient satisfaction strategies nationwide.

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Mystery Shopping the Phone Encounter

Organizations that want to understand the pre-visit customer experience gain valuable insights through mystery shopping the phone encounters. Mystery shoppers evaluate the phone encounters on specific standards including access, clarity, and ability to answer questions. They also rate overall impression and the likelihood to recommend the organization based on the phone experience.

In the assessment cited earlier, 12% of callers indicated that they were unlikely to make future contact with the organization based on the phone encounter. Only 49% indicated that they were very likely to initiate a future encounter. Somewhat likely responses accounted for 24% of the sample and 15% were neither likely nor unlikely to make future contact.

Based on that data, the organization can be fairly confident in 49% of their phone encounters making a good first impression. But even the somewhat likely responses are at risk. The 27% that were either neutral or negative in their reactions to the encounters are unlikely to become patients. This is especially true of the new patient who is “shopping” for a new provider. These patients are very likely calling the competition as well.

Beyond the Survey: On-site Mystery Shoppers

Mystery shopping can validate patient satisfaction data, and at the same time, create a compelling story to accompany the data. It is a useful adjunct to surveying in several ways.

During their encounters with an organization, mystery shoppers follow a feedback form with criteria developed in part by the organization being “shopped.” Typically, mystery shopping criteria include standard information as well as the organization’s own customer service standards or other quality measures. Those mission statements and brand promises being touted in the advertising come under close scrutiny by mystery shoppers.

However, mystery shopping criteria are presented in concrete terms.

Mystery shoppers not only give numeric scores when gauging the experience against criteria, they qualify their findings in a narrative format that further explains the actual patient experience including their feelings.

Instead of “Did you feel welcomed?” mystery shoppers will answer questions such as, “Did someone greet you immediately upon entering the door? If not, how long did you wait prior to being greeted?” and, “When calling to make an appointment, were you offered a same-day appointment? If not, when was the next available appointment? And, how well did that appointment time meet your expectations?” Mystery shopping can also be used to assess if referrals are made within the system or if staff are sending patients outside of the system for care. In the assessment, we found that well-meaning staff, when asked if the organization provided a certain type of service, would send callers to the competitor because he/she wasn’t familiar with the organization’s services.

Much of this type of information is difficult to ascertain from a satisfaction survey. Organizations are often at the mercy of the survey return rate. And because participation is voluntary, the surveying organization cannot demand clarification or explanation of responses. With mystery shopping, an organization is guaranteed that a visit or call is made and the assessment is summarized both with scores and narrative describing the rationale or emotion behind the score. Mystery shoppers not only give numeric scores when gauging the experience against criteria, they qualify their findings in a narrative format that further explains the actual patient experience including their feelings. Surveys do a great job of measuring how satisfied patients are with various aspects of their encounter but mystery shopper narratives explain why the encounter was satisfactory or not. Offering specific examples helps move that information from the head to the heart.

The mystery shopper’s narrative also has the advantage of specificity. While a patient may mark on a survey that he was “dissatisfied” with wait times in an emergency room waiting area, a mystery shopper is able to paint a clear picture of what is dissatisfying: *“After checking in, I waited in the waiting area for 45 minutes before anyone checked back with me. There was only one other patient in the waiting room for 35 of those minutes. This seemed like a very long time to me, especially because I had indicated that I had severe knee pain. I was afraid to go to the restroom, in case a nurse came for me while I was gone. I could see staff laughing and talking in the back area. They didn’t look busy at all. And no one let me know anything about the*

Mystery Shopping is a snapshot in time of how the organization handles moments of truth during a true-to-life patient experience.

wait time. When the nurse, Ellen, finally came for me, she was very friendly and kept the conversation light until we were in a private area where she could begin taking my information. But by then I was so irritated, I just wanted to get going.”

The mystery shopper’s narrative is specific about how long the patient had to wait and whether or not this was acceptable to him. In the narrative, it also describes what else was going on in the department at the time, and most importantly, his perceptions. It also mentions an employee by name, which is important for training or recognition purposes. In this case, the organization had a clear standard for keeping patients informed of wait times. The narrative provided specific information about how the staff fared on this standard.

Some organizations use mystery shopping as an opportunity to involve staff members. They will inform the staff in advance when implementing a mystery shopping program, even soliciting their input on the development of the shoppers’ criteria. In doing so, the employer reinforces standards and makes the evaluation process transparent.

Feedback from mystery shoppers is a wonderful way to test and reinforce to staff the data from patient satisfaction surveys. Using the concrete examples shared by mystery shoppers helps to make the data more real. Once that happens, staff are more likely to assist in making meaningful changes.

Mystery shopping is a conscious relationship entered into between the organization and the mystery shopping firm. It is not dependent on a random sample of patients being surveyed or an uncertain return rate when the surveys are sent out. It is a snapshot in time of how the organization handles moments of truth during a true-to-life patient experience. But perhaps the most compelling reason to do mystery shopping goes back to the old adage; you never get a second chance to make a good first impression. If you lose the customer at the first phone call or within minutes of walking in the door, you may never have the chance to impress him with your state-of-the-art technology and highly educated staff.

Where Does the Experience Happen?

Mystery shopping evaluates how consistently employees are living the organization’s mission, vision, values and brand promise. Regardless of the consumer’s point of contact, staff should be consistent in bringing the mission and brand promise to life. With this in mind, organizations will often deploy mystery shoppers to several points of access. This can mean mystery shopping outpatient services, ambulatory centers, medical practices, urgent care and emergency services both in person and through phone contacts.

Action	Expectation	Encounter	Outcome
Patient Calls Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prompt answer - Address questions - Provide help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Automated system - 2 transfers - Placed on hold 	 
Makes Appointment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Convenient date/time - Confirmation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 6 week wait - During week day - Offers to put on wait list 	 
Drives to Clinic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parking congestion - Parking fees - Hassle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Smooth entry into lot - Accessible parking - Attendant accepts debit 	 
Enters building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Signs or someone to direct where to go 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No visible sign - No human encounter or visual cue on entry 	 



Overall Experience: Patient decides

Since patient and caller experiences are largely dependent on the performance of the individual employee; a single department was able to receive both the highest and the lowest individual encounter scores. Such disparities among employees can indicate failings in training, accountability, and attitude – all leadership issues.

On-site

In-person mystery shoppers can present as either “patients” or “visitors” to the organization. “Patients” will use real life situations tailored to each particular area of the organization, from a physician’s office to the emergency department, to inpatient and outpatient settings. These mystery “patients” may have another mystery shopper accompany them as a family member in order to supply additional details from that important point of view.

Visitors’ Perspective

Mystery shoppers who are “visitors” to the facility can provide general impressions about directions, clear signage, atmosphere and housekeeping. They may spend time in public areas, listening to and observing staff interactions and other customers’ reactions and comments. A mystery visitor may act as if she is lost in order to assess how well employees respond to both unsolicited and solicited needs.

Prospective Employee

Another valuable source of information is the mystery shopper who poses as a “prospective employee.” Does the organization seem welcoming to the job-seeker? Are his potential co-workers professional in their interactions? How easy is it to find and fill out a job application, either in-person or on-line? How quickly does the organization respond to an on-line application? When organizations spend upwards of one hundred thousand dollars on employee recruitment, it is wise to assess what happens when a prospective employee makes contact.

Phone Encounters

Phone-in mystery shoppers will have different criteria than in-person shoppers, but are able to glean a number of important details from a phone call to the switchboard, department, call center or office. How many rings it took to get an answer, how many times they were transferred, how long they were on hold, how soon they could schedule an appointment – all of these details can shed revealing light on customer experiences. The caller will also determine how the phone call influenced her attitude toward future contacts. A mystery shopper will grade the organization on this question: “Based on this phone encounter, how likely are you to make future contact with this clinic?”

Finally, mystery shoppers can also describe consumer experiences with the organization's Web site. Oftentimes, a Web page serves as the consumer's first impression of the organization. The ease of navigation and general usefulness of the site are additional ways in which customers will judge an organization. Does the site offer directions and maps? Can physicians' names be found by specialty? Are phone numbers and hours of operation clear and easy to find?

Putting a Face on the Data

Many mystery shopping firms provide clients with 24/7 Web-based access to data collected during mystery shopping. This access allows the hospital or medical practice client to see the progression of the study as it unfolds.

After mystery shoppers have concluded their visits to an organization, they produce a narrative report summarizing the findings including internal best practices and areas for improvement. Organizations have the opportunity to use these reports in a variety of ways.

One is to identify training opportunities. Because employees are mentioned by name in the reports, it is easier to tailor the coaching that each employee specifically needs. For example, one system that conducted mystery shopping was confident that employees lived its excellent standards. In mystery shopping 75 sites however, there were major inconsistencies. Since patient and caller experiences are largely dependent on the performance of the individual employee, a single department was able to receive both the highest and the lowest individual encounter scores. Such disparities among employees can indicate failings in training, accountability, and attitude – all leadership issues.

This system had great opportunity to use this report to put a face on the data for employees and to provide specific training topics for them. It also provided the opportunity to recognize those employees who were identified as excellent performers and tap into their perspectives on how to live out the organization's standards.

Organizations also use mystery shopping to determine the need for process improvement. Using the detailed perspectives of mystery shoppers, leaders can identify specific shortcomings in a way that eliminates denial and blame. Both staff and leaders are often more willing to become engaged in improvement initiatives when they understand specifics about the experience.

By viewing themselves through the eyes of their consumers, healthcare organizations that use mystery shoppers have a competitive edge over those who rely solely on survey data. Consumers are ultimately the ones who decide if the organization consistently lives up to its promises; taking the mystery out of those consumers experiences will keep them coming back.

In summary, how can you get the most from the mystery shopping experience?

- **Use the shopping experience to thoroughly understand customers' expectations.** For example, do customers expect that the phone will be answered by the third ring? Do they want the parking lot attendant to direct them to the surgical suite? Understanding the customers' expectations will help you find ways to meet those expectations. This may include installing new signage, updating your Web site or outsourcing your call center.
 - **Use mystery shopping to bring the customer viewpoint into your healthcare organization.** For example, from a healthcare organization's perspective, the waiting experience is frequently a function of unexpected medical emergencies and delays which often can't be avoided. For patients, the waiting experience starts with how they are welcomed, extends to the ambience of the waiting area, the amenities available, cleanliness, and many other moments of truth. But the most important aspect of their wait is how they are kept apprised of delays. Who kept them informed, how often they were updated and whether or not these actions helped to ease the frustration of the actual wait time. Understanding the anxiety and frustration from a customer's point of view can lead to simple solutions to waiting room delays such
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as appointing a nurse or receptionist as the waiting room liaison, installing a patient tracking board, or offering beepers which let the customers wait in a nearby coffee shop or cafeteria.

- **Use mystery shopping to uncover discrepancies between the service promise and the service delivered.** This includes everything from cleanliness of the facility to the compassion of the staff. Does your hospital deliver on the mission statement posted in the lobby? Does it live up to the compassionate, personal touch your patients expect? If not, your patients will certainly notice. Let mystery shoppers uncover the discrepancies and use their feedback to implement necessary changes. This could include making simple changes to housekeeping policies or addressing more complicated issues around privacy and patient transport.
 - **Let mystery shoppers bring lessons learned from other industries.** Mystery shoppers work in other industries that deal with some of the same service issues facing healthcare. Learn how other industries are successfully addressing these service challenges – ranging from long waits to limited capacity.
 - **Use mystery shopping information as a training opportunity.** Hospital staff wants to provide the best experience for consumers. When mystery shoppers provide documentation – including pictures and concrete examples of poor service - employees can see the discrepancy between ideal and delivered service. Mystery shopping can provide an incentive and opportunity to change behaviors.
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About the Author



Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA, President

As president of Baird Consulting, Kristin Baird leads a team of healthcare innovators dedicated to enhancing the patient experience through service excellence.

Baird's passion and perspective are based on thirty years of healthcare expertise, ranging from clinical nursing, community outreach and call center management to public relations and hospital administration. For more than a decade immediately prior to founding the consulting firm, Baird also served in an executive capacity over marketing and business development for a Wisconsin hospital and its affiliated clinics.

In addition to her work in customer service strategies, mystery shopping and employee engagement, Baird is a published author and renowned industry speaker. Her philosophy that organizational clarity among leaders drives employee engagement and will change the face of healthcare is clearly demonstrated through various books, including her newest, entitled *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence – The Healthcare Leader's Guide to Putting Passion into Practice*. This builds on the principles found in her books *Customer Service in Healthcare* and *Reclaiming the Passion*.

Having won more than twenty awards, Baird's primary success is in coaching and supporting hospitals and health systems internationally. Her work has further been the topic of various articles and workshops with such prestigious healthcare organizations as Press Ganey, the Society for Healthcare Strategy and Market Development, the National Association for Healthcare Quality, the Medical Group Management Association, *The Beryl Institute*, Avatar International, and the Forum for Healthcare Strategists. Baird earned a Bachelor of Science degree in nursing from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and a Master of Science degree in Health Services Administration from Cardinal Stritch College.

Baird is a senior faculty member of *The Beryl Institute*, and has presented at its annual conference.

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