

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.

What are the Scams?

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.

In another version of the scam, consumers are "hired" to be mystery shoppers and told that their first assignment is to evaluate a money transfer service, like Western Union or MoneyGram. The shopper receives a check with instructions to deposit it in a personal bank account, withdraw the amount in cash, and wire it to a third party. By law, banks must make the funds from deposited checks available within days, but uncovering a fake check can take weeks. Individuals are responsible for the checks they deposit, so if a check turns out to be a fake, they are responsible for paying the bank back. It's a good idea never to deposit a check from someone you don't know, especially if the stranger asks you to wire money.

The Facts of Mystery Shopping

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

- Do your homework about mystery shopping. Check libraries, bookstores, or online sites for tips on how to find legitimate companies hiring mystery shoppers, as well as how to do the job effectively.
- Search the Internet for reviews and comments about mystery shopping companies that are accepting applications online.
- Don't pay a fee to become a mystery shopper. Legitimate companies don't charge people to work for them – they pay people to work for them.
- Never wire money as part of a mystery shopping assignment.

You can visit the Mystery Shopping Providers Association (MSPA) website at mysteryshop.org to search a database of mystery shopper assignments and learn how to apply for them. The MSPA offers certification programs for a fee, but you don't need "certification" to look – or apply – for assignments in its database.

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."
- Require that you pay for "certification."
- Guarantee a job as a mystery shopper.
- Charge a fee for access to mystery shopping opportunities.
- Sell directories of companies that employ mystery shoppers.
- Ask you to deposit a check and wire some or all of the money to someone.

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 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 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. Watch a new video, How to File a Complaint, at ftc.gov/video to learn more. 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.

