

# **How To Enhance Your Competitive Edge: Hire A Spy!**

*by Steve Okun*

Espionage. Reconnaissance. Surveillance. Call it what you will, but understand that in today's business place, "spying" is an essential component for maintaining a competitive advantage in customer satisfaction and retention. It remains crucial that you have your finger on the pulse of what your competition is doing... as well as how your own operation measures up to competition. Complacency in this area often destroys good businesses before they know it.

## **Strategic Knowledge is Power**

Our industry has come a long way in monitoring itself against theft and fictitious claims by way of the latest digital security hardware. But, safeguarding our competitive edge by monitoring how we do...what we do is another story. Regardless of how vigilant you are in sustaining a pleasant environment for the customers at your business, management's eyes and ears often aren't enough to render objective monitoring and adequate feedback. More information combined with candid oversight and critical evaluation provides a more effective basis for steering a business towards continuing success.

Mystery or phantom shopping is the systematic practice of secret observation in order to accumulate assessable information. It has become a tremendously effective tool for maintaining a sensitive customer service vigil and preserves quality customer retention.

## **Seize The Competitive Advantage**

You can hire a professional spy or simply do-it-yourself. Either way, the quality of your effort and level of commitment will determine the overall efficacy of the results. You will need to develop a list of criteria for evaluation. Creating and using an established form helps maintain consistency within your survey. This standardization will facilitate the uniform information capture from numerous inquiries and visits.

## **Third-Party Spy Works Best**

When it comes to spying on the competition, there's nothing new about a business owner checking out his competition. Accordingly, it's hard to maintain anonymity when most of the competition recognizes one another and anticipates your scrutiny. That's why it makes sense to have someone else do your spy work.

When gathering information, an objective, emotionally detached observer is the best way to investigate a competing operation. Acknowledging that impressions and interpretations vary from person to person, this stealth-like review is best utilized with multiple observers who make inspections at the same site. Overlapping their observations and layering their assessments will offer a rather effective judgment of real and perceived issues with the operation.

## **Bootstrap Reconnaissance: How To Go Stealth...On The Cheap**

Enlist about a dozen people who are non-related to the operation in any way, and plan to pay them for their critical feedback. Invite them to an off-location site for orientation and provide them with your evaluation form. Explain the mission and emphasize the importance of their unvarnished candor as being a valuable tool. Give each “spy” a scheduled time to visit and assure them of reimbursement for the service and products you would like them to purchase, or give them a budget figure as a guide. A hand-carwash is a sensible choice because it’s easy to critique and allows for observation time in the business. Your spies should get a receipt of the transaction and include it with the returned evaluation form.

### **Spy On Every Operation, Including Your Own**

Ask your spies to make a thoughtful tour of the entire operation. Their efforts should be individual and separate, encouraging free and independent thought.

Provoke their sensory awareness. Ask that they scrutinize interior and exterior lighting in overcast and dusk conditions, as well as nighttime. Expect them to check all signage for ease of understanding and overall appearance. Insist that they make the inspection as thorough as possible. Probe their feelings about color and noise in your printed evaluation form. Invite them each to rank ten things in which they suggest improvement and encourage their independent criticism. Challenge spies for their complete and uncompromised feelings and emotions. No pain, no gain.

### **Evaluate and Analyze Feedback**

Gather all of the feedback and evaluate the responses. Detach yourself as much as possible and remain painfully impartial. Recruit the assistance of a business professional you respect and trust to lend a hand in your final evaluation. The challenge in this exercise is your ability to be objective. Categorize similar concerns and scrutinize their individual findings for your critical assessment. Remain sensitive to the areas that need remediation and search out meaningful improvement. Safeguard the secrecy of the exercise and maintain it as a cyclical, on-going continuous improvement task. Remember that there is a direct relationship between the effort and energy given to this activity... and the resulting quality of the results. Challenge yourself for excellence and celebrate your sensible avoidance of complacency.

### **You Snooze, You Lose.**

A suggestion to the business owner who doesn’t care about the other guy: Wake up! In case you never heard of Pearl Harbor, be advised that surprises may be fine for birthday parties and even winning the lottery, but not all surprises are intended to be happy events. Others in the same business as you should always be seeking an effective competitive edge. The more you know about all the activities within your marketplace, the better your chances are of continuously enjoying success. Remember the old adage: “Ignorance is bliss”... and understand that it really doesn’t apply to business. Here’s one that does: You Snooze, You Lose!

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