

# Mystery Shopping Challenges and Opportunities in Pharma



All mystery shops are not alike. Conducting a mystery shop of pharmaceutical call centres requires attention to considerations specific to the industry, and the outcomes have benefits that can reach far beyond the immediate focus of the shop.

**David Lithwick and Sylvia Helene Perras**

In this article, we hope to provide an understanding of what makes the shopping of pharmaceutical call centres unique. We also offer a number of valuable tips for carrying out a call centre mystery shop. For those MRIA readers working outside of health care, the pharma sector serves as an excellent reference in learning about high-level mystery shopping. The pharmaceutical industry is heavily regulated; as a result, call centre staff need to be very professional, informative and helpful when answering phone inquiries.

## Background

There has been an increase in patient care support at pharma call centres. Growth over the past few years, based on our discussions with pharma companies and call centre providers, may be as high as 25 per cent. The reasons for this increase are numerous:

- advances in technology (e.g., blogs, emails, Internet) enabling quicker access to medical information
- more opportunities for patients and caregivers to talk to someone anonymously (e.g., support programs)
- more patient empowerment in deciding which medications to take and which therapies to pursue

- rising incidences in chronic diseases such as Alzheimer's, MS, and heart disease, translating into a greater need for dispersing information quicker and more easily
- expansion of organizations embracing call centres (e.g., pharma companies; companies providing medical devices, oral nutritionals, natural supplements; nonprofits; and government)
- Health Canada regulations prohibiting pharma companies from advertising directly to patients – outside of the Internet and the spillover from American TV commercials and print ads, calling a company's patient care number is an easy option for getting information quickly. As a result, call centre support, backed by highly trained professional staff (pharmacists, nurses, dieticians), is on the rise.

*Why conduct mystery shops of pharma call centres?* While much pharma market research is conducted on physicians, since they drive which medication patients will take, less is conducted on patient satisfaction. And when it comes to assessing patient support at the call centre level, mystery shopping is most effective. Certainly, you can monitor patient blogs and conduct focus groups, but having a

sample of patients and caregivers, armed with pre-arranged scenarios, to provide feedback on their experiences after they contact call centres is more hands-on, descriptive and measurable.

*What makes pharma call centres a high-level mystery shop?*

The very nature of the inquiries (e.g., asking for assistance on a health-related issue) by real patients and caregivers, along with the high level of professionalism and education in the staff responding to these calls, is what makes the mystery shopping of pharma more complex than traditional mystery shopping of audiences such as retail outlets.

While assessing sales performance (“Did the rep try to cross-sell? offer you an incentive to sign up? ask for your business?”) is not relevant to shopping pharma call centres, other questions are, for example, “Did they use plain language? ask you for your history? provide suggestions about where to find further information?”

## The very nature of the inquiries by real patients and caregivers, along with the high level of professionalism and education in the staff responding to calls, is what makes pharma mystery shopping more complex.

### Mini-Case

Consider the following case example. You are the marketing research manager assigned to cardiovascular medications. Recent focus groups have raised complaints that your call centre staff lacks professionalism. The most frequent issues mentioned are that call centre reps are not returning calls, making any effort to answer the caller’s questions, or volunteering advice. You decide to conduct a mystery shop to benchmark your company’s call centre against your three competitors. The goals are to uncover hard evidence to verify these complaints, and to develop strategies to overcome them. Your next steps are to decide on sample size, shopper scenarios, and questions for your shoppers to answer.

*Sample Size.* You decide on 80 shops: four companies, with 20 calls per company.

*Shopper Scenario.* Callers, recently diagnosed with high levels of bad cholesterol, have been advised to go on medication. They want to speak to the manufacturer of the brand of medication that their doctor has prescribed.

*Questions.* There are four categories of questions for the shoppers to answer, 28 questions in all.

Ease of reaching call centre (probing into the challenges the shopper had in reaching a live voice)

1. Did you reach an automatic voice menu or a live voice?
2. If you reached a voice menu, was it easy to follow?
3. To whom (e.g., medical information rep, pharmacist) did you speak?
4. Did the rep identify him- or herself?
5. Did the rep ask how he or she could help you?
6. How long did you wait until your call was returned?

Answering shopper’s questions (documenting responses that the call centre reps gave to the shopper)

7. Who should avoid taking this drug (e.g., pregnant women, heavy drinkers)?
8. What side effects (e.g., liver functioning problems) does the drug have?
9. Can I take this drug if I am taking other medications (e.g., antibiotics, corticosteroids)?
10. How does this drug lower my cholesterol?

11. By how much (e.g., 25 or 50%) will the drug lower my bad cholesterol?
12. What advantages does this drug have (e.g., muscular side effects are least severe)?
13. Will I have to take this drug for the rest of my life?
14. What advice do you have for recently diagnosed patients with high cholesterol?

Professionalism (assessing how professional the rep was)

15. Did the rep encourage you to go on the company’s website?
16. Ask if your questions had been answered?
17. Offer to email you information on the company’s product?
18. Encourage you to call again with further questions?
19. Was the rep empathetic?
20. Forthcoming with information?
21. Did the rep use plain language?
22. Take time to answer your questions?
23. Was the rep knowledgeable?

Net impressions (giving the shopper the opportunity to further comment on the experience)

24. How would you rate the way your call was handled (e.g., fair, good, excellent)?

25. How does this call compare to your own real-life experiences in calling (same, better, worse)?
26. Was there anything that impressed you about your call? If so, what?
27. Was there anything that you disliked? If so, what?
28. What suggestions do you have for improving call centre performance?

### Tips

Conduct pretest calls to work through glitches and help capture exactly the type of information you can uncover. The rule of thumb is one pretest for every ten actual calls. In the mini-case, this means eight pretest shops, given that we would be completing 80 actual shops.

Select your shoppers very carefully: They must be real patients or actual caregivers of real patients.

Network through patient support groups to find shoppers.

Cap your calls to 20 per centre, and conduct them over different times and different days. Placing too many calls at once risks tipping off your call centre and, by doing so, compromises the results.

Make sure you include third party call centres (e.g., McKesson) to shop, should you or your competitors outsource to them.

Develop your questions very carefully. Each becomes a study on its own. This means the questions should (a) be straightforward for the shopper to ask, (b) number at least 20 to capture various caller experiences, and (c) be designed so that answers are easily incorporated into tables, charts and PowerPoint.

Listen to some of the calls. Doing so will give you a much better grasp of what is taking place and will significantly add to your credibility when reporting your findings.

Be prepared to be challenged vigorously by your call centre managers. It's the rule, not the exception, for this to happen. They become very defensive. They will challenge the credibility of your shoppers, the sample size, and the questions asked. Your findings will gain in objectivity if you do three or four shops of a call centre rep who performed poorly. Do not disclose the names of the reps, and avoid sweeping comparisons (e.g., overall our call centre rated "fair" versus "very good" for Competitor A).

Set up tables in both Microsoft Word and Excel. Word is flexible, so it's suitable for comments, while Excel can fast-

track your calculations when comparing current results to historical ones.

Include SWOT analysis and recommendations in your report. For the SWOT, each strength and weakness identified should be backed by a shopper comment. For example, if one of your call centre rep's strengths is "quick response," then you should support this claim by adding the shopper's comment, for example, "I made four separate calls to the call centre. Each of my calls was returned within five minutes. Some competitors took until the next day to call back, while others did not call back at all."

### Conclusions

If used carefully, mystery shopping is an extremely effective and cost-efficient means of uncovering and assessing service strengths and weaknesses at the call centre level. It is an excellent tool for performance evaluation and training.

Mystery shopping also has other applications in the pharma market, for example, determining whether the pharmacist will give patients the generic version of a branded product instead of advising them that they have an option or, in the case of medical devices for diabetics, determining what brand of monitoring meter the pharmacist will recommend.

In addition, mystery shopping helps health-care professionals to understand what it is they are saying that encourages patients to go with one medication over another. It assists competitor sales reps to see how they are misrepresenting information about your company's products. And it helps your own company to see if any employees are disclosing sensitive information that they should not be.

Mystery shopping is a discovery process. It does not end after a quota of shops. The study concludes when the issues have been addressed thoroughly and the recommendations acted on.

---

*David Lithwick is principal of Market Alert, a Toronto-based competitive intelligence consultancy. Prior to Market Alert, David worked in banking as a CI analyst and in advertising, managing the Pfizer, S. C. Johnson, and Wendy's Restaurants accounts.*

*Sylvia Helene Perras works with David on competitive intelligence and mystery shopping assignments. She has an MBA in human resources and 25 years of experience in medical sales, marketing and clinical administration.*