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Shhh! ON THE SLY!

They are called mystery or ghost shoppers. Do they really exist? Who are they? What do they do? P S Bhavana goes mystery shopping to find out

the term was 'mysterious' enough for me to nod vigorously when I was offered a chance to do it. After all, I was curious. Wow! I would be a shopper on the prowl. But there was a catch — I was told that I would be a shopper who would not just buy, but also be a critic with a twist. Was I supposed to shop on the sly? What if I were caught? What would the experience be like? The questions wouldn't stop spilling out. I HAD to know. I HAD to 'do a shop' (technically that's what the experience is called).

What's it all about?

So began my journey. I browsed a few websites, made a few frantic calls to my friends in the research industry and tried to prepare myself for the 'kill'. I was intrigued to read titles and pop-ups (about mystery shopping) on the Net that said, "Get paid to shop, eat at restaurants,





She's the legit thing! Katrina Kaif shopping at Ananya

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- For more information, browse the Net for 'mystery shopping'.
- In India, you can try www.baiservices.com (Bare Associates International)
- Also, make sure that you find out all the details before you register. Read the fine print thoroughly.
- Gather information about the industry you want to 'shop' for.
- Plan your transport and movement (you don't get paid for it).
- Follow the guidelines before doing a shop.
- Don't talk about it or disclose your mission even to your friends.
- While shopping, be discreet and know when to fill the feedback form.

enjoy a movie, play golf, go to an amusement park or even take a cruise... get it all for free and get paid hourly!" Suddenly, I was all set to find out about the lucrativeness of the business. But Bhairavi Sagar, Business Development Director (Asia) of Bare Associates India, an organised mystery shopping association that's just come into India, said, "Yes, you can take it up as either a part or a full-time job. It's more than a billion dollar industry in the USA alone. It has just started as a business in India. But we don't want people who are looking for freebies. Mystery shopping is a serious affair. You can earn only if you work efficiently. You have to be well-read, fluent in English, honest, secretive, observant and punctual." My enthusiasm

flagged a bit. But I still wanted to find out more...

"Mystery shopping derives from a market research concept. We keep using it. But the entire mystery-shopping thing is a grey area. In countries like India, I guess the privacy laws and details are not very specified. So, liberties are sometimes taken. But I doubt if it is the same in the Western countries," said a market research executive.

Sometimes, a research agency employee poses as a customer to do a check on the services and other details of the company or industry to help the agency compile a report. Now, he's also called a 'shopper'.

The episode

I realised that my 'shopping' experience would be different. I was to be a shopper employed by a mystery shoppers' organisation, not a market research agency. And to add to the fun, one gets paid to be the undercover agent! But mind you, it was not as easy as it seemed. The process sounded gruelling to me but it could be exciting if one sees the 'earn-able' tag attached to it. "No it's simple. You just have to be computer proficient and Internet-savvy to do it," said the associate who briefed me.

So, finally, we (the business associate and I) decided to 'coffee shop'. At least, it was simpler than working sectors like retail, business, finance, automobile, hospitals or airports, of which I had little or no

knowledge! On the big day, I gingerly walked into the coffee shop (feeling something like Harry Potter under the invisibility cloak). I ordered a cup of coffee while sniffing the wafting smell of coffee beans. Pure ooh-la-la! But my reverie broke, I couldn't linger, I had to be quick and mentally note the name, the physical description and behaviour of the person taking my order. After all, I had heard about the form that was to be filled and I didn't want to be caught off guard while answering the questions. Then (with my confidence soaring), I walked to the table that had the associate smiling at me. I perched myself on the wooden chair and looked around. The next step: To note the cleanliness, the maintenance and the ambience. It then went on to the price, the quality of service and time, temperature of the food or commodities, and finally the after-service. Phew! That was quite a bit. I showered her with queries, keyed in my experience and feverishly made my notes.

Howzzat?

Gradually, the mystery unfurled itself to me. The shopper signs in, identifies her area, puts in a request for the 'shop', gets an e-mail confirming where she is to go, commits to do a 'x' number of 'shops' on a particular date, completes the routine, fills the feedback form, submits it and gets reimbursed later. But the questionnaires are customised according to the industry that needs the feedback. (I had a restaurant feedback form to fill post the 'shop'). I had to fill it online and make no mistakes doing so. After submission, one waits for 48 hours processing time. "Usually, the bills have to be scanned and sent for reimbursements," said Bhairavi. I strutted out of the coffee shop with a happy tummy and mind. [E]