



The Successful Secret Shopper

The Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company began in 1866. They started with small mini grocery stores in the New York area. Average store size was 200 square feet. By the end of the century they were operating 198 stores and had consolidated their name to A&P Grocery. After World War I expansion was explosive and they were operating 13,961 stores. They became the largest grocery store chain in the world. They also laid the foundation for modern grocery stores and marketing. Yet it is now eclipsed by such names as Wal-Mart, Kroger's, Tom Thumb, and others.

What was the secret to their success in the beginning? What happened to such a great retail company in today's market? I don't believe it is ever just one thing that makes us a success or one thing that makes us a failure. After reading the book "A&P: The Story of the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company" by Avis Anderson, I believe it was "information." This information was supplied in part by their use of Secret Shoppers.

Two areas of important focus of the Secret Shopper were the competition and themselves. A good Secret Shopper has a list of items they are checking when they focus on shopping the competition. The first thought that comes to mind is shopping prices. But that is only a part of the focus. For instance, if someone has the cheapest price in town to unlock a car, but can't get to it until next Tuesday, then who cares about price at that point. I need my car unlocked now! So let's take a look at what we would like to see from our Secret Shopper and how to respond to this new information.

Below are some suggestions that you may want to ask. There are most likely more questions you would like answers to, so just add them to the list. The below are only suggestions to help get you thinking. First, the person you want to secret shop is yourself. We found someone at our church and gave them a list of questions to call and ask. They were to pretend they had the keys to their car locked in their driveway of the home they had just purchased.

1. How much to unlock our car that is "whatever year and model" and how long will it take you to get to us.

2. Since I'm at my new house do you rekey locks? How much and when can you do the work? Do you have extra protection for sliding glass doors and how much is it?

3. We also need a safe for our house. How much are they and do you have some I can come look at and purchase on the spot?

Second person you may want to shop is you're after hours on call person. Give someone the money to stay at home and lock their keys in their car. Have them pay in cash and not want a receipt. Mark the bills with a smile face.

1. How long does it take them to respond after hours? Did they turn in the money and report the call? Are there busy times when you really should have 2 on call people?

2. Ask the same questions above and see if the locksmith gave out a business card to the customer and invited them into the shop to purchase other items, like a safe?

3. Did the locksmith look professional and in uniform?

Next on the list is shopping your competition. You can use basically the same questions as above. But I am certain you want as much information as you

can squeeze out of each call. One of the big lessons you may find is that you have some of your services priced too cheap. Don't be afraid to raise prices and make a profit. Trying to be the cheapest in everything will only cost you profit and open you up to potential problems.

Now I come back to A&P stores. What happened to them? I believe they "over" estimated who they were and their place in America grocery shopping. I also believe that they, as well as other grocers, "under" estimated their competition such as Kroger's, Albertson's, and Wal-Mart. They did this by saying such things as "This is the way we have always done it." "Why fix it if ain't broken." They also ignored changes in their industry and didn't keep in touch with how their customers were buying and what they were wanting to purchase. The locksmith industry is much the same, and I notice some shops sending away customers to other locksmiths and big box retailers. Then they complain that they don't have enough business, but it is out there, it's just going to someone else. Most industries send out secret shoppers on a quarterly basis to keep in touch with what is going on around them. When was the last time you stepped back and took a good look at what you were doing and what those around you are doing?

INL