

YVONNE GRINAM-NICHOLSON | HOW THE OUR HELPS TO IMPROVE UTILITY CUSTOMER SERVICE STANDARDS

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For businesses, delivering quality customer service is a sine qua non for success. As long as the price is affordable and the quality of customer care as well as the goods and services are consistently pleasing to the consumer, they will continue to beat a path to that door, or if they are dissatisfied, they will look for other suitable options.

But what happens to the utility consumer whose choice is limited (or non-existent) and who continually experiences poor customer service? Some consider it a waste of time to complain when they encounter poor customer service, while many, even though they may protest, often fail to register it in a manner where a correction can be made. Instead, they succumb to the “me cyan bother” syndrome.

Naturally, the next question from the lips of any disaffected Jamaican utility customer would be: so what is the Office of Utilities Regulation (OUR) doing?

As a regulator, the OUR’s role includes determining the regulatory framework within which the regulated entities operate as well as setting the utility service rates and standards, including the standard of customer service, for some of them. In doing so, we must ensure that we take into account the needs of stakeholders including the Government of Jamaica, utility service providers and the largest group: the consumers.

To honour this role, we embarked on a Mystery Shopping (MS) programme designed to monitor the providers’ service level. Since 2017, we have implemented our MS research to monitor the major utility providers: Digicel, FLOW, Cable and Wireless Jamaica, the National Water Commission (NWC), and the Jamaica Public Service Company Ltd (JPS).

VALUE OF MYSTERY SHOPPING

The question may quite rightly be asked about the value of MS and here, some background and information is necessary.

'Mystery Shopping', also called 'secret shopper' or 'secret caller', was coined in the 1940s by a research company, WilMark, which used the technique of hiring private investigators to pose as employees as part of an undercover operation to stop workplace theft/fraud.

The research has evolved to include data collection for, among other things, customer service. There is now even a trade association Mystery Shopping Providers Association (<https://www.mspa-global.org/industry>).

The main feature of MS is that it is a covert activity and persons undertaking the task do not declare that they are conducting it. MS tests the operation of staff to confirm training standards and service delivery at the face-to-face point, with the main objective being to increase the customer-service levels.

The OUR's MS objectives are in keeping with the organisation's efforts to continually implement policies to improve the well-being of utility consumers. Annual surveys measure the current level of customer service, in-store, in the call centres, online, and on social media - chat rooms/helpdesks, Facebook, Twitter and blogs; customer satisfaction in relation to service quality, specifically, customer experience; the level of improvement and the overall customer satisfaction rating for each provider.

What's the value of this technique? The MS research, in and of itself, does not change behaviour. However, the results are in how the findings are utilised to make changes to the OUR's Guaranteed and Overall Standards (where applicable) to benefit consumers.

The notable actions emanating from OUR's MS research are a new overall standard in customer service for the JPS and the development of a Code of Practice for Complaints Handling (COP) for all providers.

Among the consumer service-related aspects of the OUR's Decision on the JPS's 2019-2024 Tariff Application was **EOS13** (Effectiveness of Customer Service) used to monitor and measure the level of customer service delivered by the JPS. This standard is to, inter alia, allow the regulator to verify performance claims made by the JPS and establish minimum customer service quality levels to meet consumer needs and expectations.

Following on its MS findings, the OUR convened Annual Symposia on Utilities Customer Service and Quality of Service Improvement from which the COP was collaboratively developed.

SOME OF THE SECRETS

So what are some of the 'secrets' of the OUR's MS? Personnel hired and trained by a research company go to the utility provider and anonymously undertake a transaction. Each 'shopper' is given a specific scenario, for example, enquiring about how to obtain a new meter, a bill query, or payment plans.

The OUR provides the research company with the contact details of the utility's outlets.

'Shoppers' remain anonymous and are both males and females across various ages. No single 'shopper' shops more than one location for the same provider (an important quality control measure) to ensure that their previous experience with another location does not influence their thoughts for the other.

Visits and calls are done during both the typical peak (busy) and off peak (less busy) periods determined by dates to assess the provider's performance when there is heavy traffic (peak) versus when there is a slow trickle of customers.

The in-store 'shopper' engages the utility personnel to get a first-hand experience of customer service. Some of the metrics include the quality of the interaction; whether the customer-service representative was professional, knowledgeable, courteous, and was able to appropriately respond to the concerns/complaint.

Online, chatroom, and social media 'shoppers' evaluate, for example, ease of bill payment (and instructions), access, knowledge of customer service personnel, and timeliness/usefulness of responses.

The telephone ‘shoppers’ check the wait time before the call is answered (number of rings); evaluate customer-service experience (quality of the responses, knowledge of the agent, clarity of the resolution/information); indicate their perception of the interaction with the representative; and evaluate whether the agent was professional, knowledgeable, courteous, and able to appropriately respond to the concerns/complaints.

The data-collection tool is electronic, and in the final analysis, the sum of scores method is used to determine the location’s customer-service performance.

The Mystery Shopping Survey is another tool in the OUR’s monitoring arsenal to continually improve the quality of customer care that utility customers receive.

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