

Would you pass the parking health check?

Mystery Shopping gives parking operators a way of seeing their services through the eyes of customers, writes Penny Winder

Parking remains an emotive topic and the industry regularly receives negative press, often describing parking enforcement as a wholly revenue raising tactic by the public sector. In the present economic climate this accusation will continue to be made and pressure will be on local authorities to reduce or eliminate charges to 'help the local economy'. It may seem that the only option for local authorities is either to capitulate to such demands and reduce charges and income or refuse requests and face ongoing negative publicity.

Another option and one more in tune with the Traffic Management Acts Operational Guidance is to demonstrate the value that effective and appropriate parking control brings to the wider community; a value that needs to be communicated through good customer service.

With the motoring public becoming increasingly sceptical and better informed; councils cannot afford to take the view that 'we know best' or 'we do it best' without providing evidence to support the viewpoint.

But how can a local authority measure something as intangible as customer service?

The Traffic Management Act's (2004) Operational Guidance recommends a regular appraisal of an authority's parking service to determine what works well, what doesn't and where extra training and support will help staff to do their job effectively. One such evaluative method that Alpha recommends to Parking Managers is mystery shopping.

Mystery shopping enables local authorities to understand the demands faced by front-line parking staff on a daily basis; whether they perform well and whether action may be needed to address any problems.

To gain a true picture of the effectiveness of operations, the best solution is to 'mystery shop' on a regular basis, ideally every six or twelve months. After all, any local authority operation that underestimates the changing nature of parking enforcement can find the services it provides have gone stale and may not be keeping pace with users' requirements.

Gateshead council acts as an example to demonstrate how councils that embraced mystery shopping discovered what was really happening at the sharp end of parking

Gateshead council employed mystery shopping to measure their overall parking performance.

Alpha Parking's mystery shopper team posed as members of the public, interacting with CEOs to check their knowledge of parking enforcement in the local area. The team shadowed CEOs within designated beats to assess their performance in relation to dealing with the public and carrying out their duties.

The team also conducted an in-depth review of the main procedures carried out by the notice processing department by making phone calls, apparently as members of the public, with questions related to penalty charge notices (PCNs).

The results showed where improvements could be made to CEO deployment patterns and general procedure improvements. PCN numbers increased and with it income. It also generated data for annual reports and provided a benchmark for similar exercises in future.

“Good customer service is highly important to Gateshead Council. The Mystery Shopping exercise provided the council with the necessary information to determine what processes were working well and what needed to be reviewed. It allowed us to benchmark best practice, with the data collected acting as useful tool for any future exercises” says Gateshead Council Representations Officer, Andy Waters.

For the purpose of an in-depth review such as this or even a simpler Healthcheck, mystery shopping should not be used to ‘entrap’ individuals such as deliberately leaving a vehicle in contravention of signs and lines to see if it is ticketed. Such crude entrapment tactics will only deliver a cursory insight into how well your parking team is performing, or how quickly they observe and ticket the contravention – and that might be very quick indeed.

Mystery shopping does not just have to be conducted on-street. City of Lincoln Council employed Alpha Parking to measure and evaluate the service being provided in its car parks.

City of Lincoln Council conducted mystery shopping of their parking attendants (PAs) to benchmark their performance against the framework of ‘The Lincoln Way’. The ‘Lincoln Way’ sets out guidelines for PAs including safety, customer care, security, cleanliness, task performance and enforcement. The council wished to determine if best practice of the guidelines were being followed and whether there were areas that could be improved.

The City Council runs twenty car parks throughout the city, employing eighteen PAs. Alpha used a sample of the car parks to provide the council with a snapshot of their PAs performance. Using a three step process Alpha conducted a review of the parking service through posing as members of the public, shadow monitoring and compliance testing with particular reference to



customer service, task performance and enforcement; all aspects that are important to good customer service.

‘The Lincoln Way sets out the standards and guidelines we expect our staff to adhere to. By conducting mystery shopping we gained an insight into the performance of our front-line parking staff and were able to review the processes put in place and to evaluate whether any changes were necessary’ says City of Lincoln’s Parking Services Officer, Janet Martin.

The environment in which parking operates is continually changing – economically, legislatively, and technologically – but a constant remains: good customer service is imperative to improving the image of the industry. While there is a cost involved in carrying out any service review, those costs compared with the potential loss in income from an inefficient and ineffective service is minimal in the long- term. Investing in independent parking reviews is an investment that pays for itself.

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