You’ve done the research. You know what a mystery shop is and how it may help your organization. So, now it is time to choose a provider. What should you look for? What sets apart the good from the great when it comes to mystery shopping services providers? CSE recommends following these 5 best practices:

1. **DEVELOPMENTAL, CONSULTATIVE APPROACH**
   The results of mystery shopping services will not be isolated to one part of the organization; rather, its effects will have implications—ideally positive—throughout the organization. Your provider should truly understand your goals and expectations for the program. Are you shopping because you want to catch someone “in the act” or because you want to improve your organization? Mystery shopping to get a “temperature read” simply doesn’t help move the needle of improvement. The best way to achieve maximum benefit from a mystery shopping program is to use it to help develop your organization’s people, processes and place. Rather than working with a provider that fits you into their template, seek a partner that will listen to your needs, take a holistic and consultative approach to discover the nuances in your organization, and tailor fit that solution to achieve maximum organizational improvement.

2. **QUALITY & ACCURACY**
   Mystery shops can potentially contain sensitive information. Therefore, it is important that the data is as accurate as possible. Mystery shopping services providers vary greatly in their quality control (QC) processes. Inquire with potential providers as to how they handle QC. How are the mystery shoppers chosen and prepared for their task? What happens to the mystery shop before it gets to the client? How long does this process or lack of take? What is the company’s percentage of successfully completed shops? The answers to these questions will provide insight into what you could expect when working with a provider. Great providers are proud of their QC processes and will be eager to share them with you!

3. **TECHNOLOGICAL CAPABILITY**
   Technology plays a starring role in the efficiency, usefulness and security of the information that will be collected through the use of mystery shopping services. Choose a provider that has the ability to collect data in multiple forms to get a comprehensive perspective, such as video, on-line survey, in-person visit, email, text, phone call, web-based, etc. Also ensure that your provider has the capability to collect and provide your data to you through a platform that is accessible, user-friendly, secure and flexible in its reporting capabilities.

4. **BUDGETING RESOURCES**
   If this is your first foray into mystery shopping services, chances are your budget may not reflect the importance this initiative will ultimately provide. Choose a mystery shop provider that will maximize your resources. Rather than watering down your program, consider a robust pilot program to get a more accurate picture of your organization’s potential benefits. Be sure to fully understand what your responsibilities will be and what services your partner will provide. Will they run reporting for you or will you be responsible for that? Will you provider send you completed mystery shops or will you be responsible for collecting them? What will happen if you have a dispute with a mystery shop—what is the process? Be sure you and your provider see eye-to-eye on this. Knowing this information up front will help to avoid potential roadblocks ahead.

5. **INDUSTRY STANDARDS**
   Your Mystery Shopping Services provider should be a member in good standing of the Mystery Shopping Provider’s Association (MSPA). The MSPA is a Trade Association of companies which provide mystery shopping services and sets the standards for and monitors the mystery shopping industry. To be a member, each provider must be accepted based on operating according to the MSPA Code of Ethics and Professional Standards, their business practices and legitimacy in the mystery shopping space. To view MSPA member organizations, please visit www.MysteryShop.org.