

Audithost

Mystery shopping coordination software pulls it all together

You will look in vain to the major research software providers for features in their standard data collection packages to support mystery shopping. It has taken a niche player, PAI, perhaps better known for its research reporting tools, widely used throughout the automotive industry, to rise to the challenge with its Audithost – a solution so comprehensive that its integrated modules span all of the different levels of the research food chain.

Here's how it works. At the corporate HQ, the mystery shopping program manager uses Audithost to schedule work with regional or local mystery shopping agencies, monitoring the workload as each shop is completed. Mystery shopping agencies log into their Audithost accounts on the Internet and schedule upcoming work with interviewers. Out in the field, mystery shoppers take a laptop or tablet PC and a digital camera with them. The PC details their schedule of calls and allows them to record each shop online immediately after the site visit. Finally, corporate managers, decision-makers and

even local managers at the store receive customized views of relevant and up-to-date results through a password controlled Web portal.

Easing the burden on the research program manager

The system provides a particularly powerful workflow scheme that takes away almost all of the routine work involved in administering a mystery shopping program. At one level, it is a supplier relationship management tool that handles contacts and interactions between mystery shop managers and mystery shopping companies used.

As it happens, most of Audithost's users are corporate people using the system to manage their relationships with specialist mystery shopping companies working on a regional basis or in a local area, as is common in the United States. However, the system could easily be used by a research agency to administer its in-house mystery shopping fieldwork force, and manage relationships with more than one

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client organization.

The administrator can enter details of all of the locations to be shopped. Once this has been done, only changes need to be entered. In the administrator's area is a straightforward tool to design or alter the questionnaire. These questionnaires are typically a combination of binary check box (was this criterion met?) questions and comment fields (what was the problem?), and these are designed and presented to the interviewer as a scrolling form.

Providing a mystery shopping marketplace

With the questionnaire defined and the shop location details set-up, you can invite the different shop companies you have contacts for to bid for the work. In fact, you can get them to bid against each other, and accept the most competitive bid. In this way, the tool can create a kind of mystery shopping marketplace, not only ensuring that prices are competitive, but also that standards are maintained and even improved. This is because all of the information on the mystery shopping ac-

Audithost by Productive Access Inc. (www.paiwhq.com)

Pros

- End-to-end support
- Manages all the routine scheduling
- Seamless Web-based functionality
- Highly customizable
- Real-time reporting of results through built-in Web portal

Cons

- Big price tag
- Vendors must agree to use the same solution
- Not suitable for Palm PDAs
- No built-in support for real-time mobile data communication with field workers

tivities from the agents in the field flows back into the system, and the program manager is able to compare the relative performance of the companies.

Audithost provides the kind of management information that is virtually impossible to get without an automated system such as this. It also means that this system can be used to great effect auditing the auditors and making the entire process more accountable.

Audithost will only work properly if all of the mystery shopping agencies use the extranet administrators portal to log in, collect and allocate their work. However, it is reasonably intuitive and because it works over the internet, there is no software to install locally, and no greater requirement than a reasonably fast Internet connection and a recent Web browser. Here, the field-work coordinators can register all of the mystery shopping agents and allocate work to them. Once that happens, the interviewers will be able to collect their assignments and the questionnaire and start shopping.

Seeing is believing

Agents need to be equipped with a laptop or tablet PC, running Windows. The software is not designed to run on PDAs. However, most agents tend to go into premises unencumbered with a laptop, and retreat to their cars to complete the survey form. Not all the evidence needs to be verbatim: it also provides space for a whole gallery of digital photographs on each mystery shop report, which the shoppers can use to attach some revealing images to their written report. For this all that is required is an inexpensive digital camera. After that it is a simple process to upload the pictures and add them to the report.

It is not unusual today for offline mystery shopping programs to involve some photographs. Pictures can be valuable in verifying that the shop did take place at the time stated, and also that any items referred to (such as litter strewn outside the premises, or employees not following dress code) were not the figments of a vindictive auditor's imagination.

Doing this online adds a few more advantages. It means the photos cannot get lost or mislaid, and by attaching the images right away, you can be certain that the pictures are of the right location, and are clear and in focus. Furthermore, the images follow the report right onto the desktops of the managers of each location or any decision makers, via the results portal.

Reports on tap

On a daily basis, mystery shoppers can connect to the Internet, using a broadband or dial-up connection at home, and a simple upload /download process exchanges completed audits for new assignments. The results are immediately posted to the results viewing area, which also updates the administrator's statistics and completion reports.

Administrator-level access allows you to view the whole lot, and to grant password-controlled access to individuals or groups of other users. In principal, shop owners are able to view their shop reports, and further up the tree, regional managers and head office managers can get a broader view. Cleverly, these permission structures self-perpetuate, so maintaining them never becomes over-burdensome.

As results arrive, Audithost examines each report. Business rules set by the administrator can automatically create so-called "violation letters" if key objectives have not been met. These can be sent by e-mail or printed for despatch by regular mail, either to the store, or more tactfully, to the local area manager. A template allows administrators to design these letters to suit individual programs, and the letter can contain specific information about the issue and the steps required to resolve it, all driven from the Audithost database. More positively, congratulatory letters can also be generated automatically, if consistent improvement is noted or high scores achieved.

The contact management aspects of Audithost will even track any challenges from those who consider a judgement too harsh, and allow you to record the out-

come. It can ensure that those who regularly make the most noise do not always get off the hook.

Adding accountability

Audithost is a vast system with a hefty price tag: around \$100,000 annually. Its customers therefore tend to be the large national or multinational corporations. Houston-based oil company ConocoPhillips has been using Audithost for one year now to manage its mystery shopping program across its retail network. This covers between 50,000 and 150,000 visits a year. For Harvey Townley, mystery shopping program coordinator, it has eliminated having to juggle endless spreadsheets and has allowed him to move from a department of four employees to managing the entire program single-handedly.

Townley currently works with four different mystery shopping vendors, and in the past, it was impossible to verify that every contracted shopping visit had taken place. He calculated that the savings achieved, by being able to control this area of cost alone, have cost-justified the system. "It also lets us track the accuracy of the auditors and see who is lagging behind schedule," he says, "It gives me one-click functionality, so I can see where all the audits are, and tell how many are still missing."

Commenting on the experience using the application, he reports: "Overall, the application is very well made. It is well-designed and easy to navigate. It is pretty much seamless from the auditors' point of view."

Townley welcomes the improved communication it gives with vendors, managers and even mystery shoppers in the field. "We never had direct communication with the auditors before," he says. "Now we've eliminated the snags of having multiple communications going out, and the miscommunications that can arise."

At a time when mystery shop results are increasingly under scrutiny, Townley feels he has found a way to ensure integrity. "For us, Audithost is that policeman – it keeps everyone honest." | Q



The Audithost™ Service is brought to you by the PAI-GAMMA Partnership.
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