

Turning over the stones

If you should ever find yourself visiting GSK House in Brentford, West London, take a good look at the 'visitor' sitting next to you in reception. They might not be quite what they seem. In fact they could be one of a team of 'mystery shoppers' who for the last two years have been secretly visiting the sweeping modern headquarters of this world-renowned pharmaceuticals company. Their mission? To investigate the standard of service provided by everyone from the security guard at the entrance gates, to the helpdesk employee taking the call about a fault with the air conditioning and the engineer who comes to fix it.

For site director Tom Riggs the mystery shopping programme is the latest manifestation of the GSK facilities team's approach to service delivery – one which constantly, as he puts it, 'turns the stones over' in a bid to discover where improvements can be made, services developed and the whole operation moved forward.

GSK House was originally planned to be the head office of pharmaceutical company SmithKline Beecham. Then came merger talks between SmithKline and Glaxo Wellcome, and the building rapidly became the chosen headquarters for the newly merged operation, GlaxoSmithKline Beecham, now one of the world's largest operators in the pharmaceuticals industry.

Work on GSK House originally started in 1998 and the site has probably become best known for 'The Street' – a central glass atrium hosting cafes and other retail outlets, designed to create a flexible, creative, fun and dynamic environment where people have the opportunity to interact with each other and work more collaboratively.

SERVICE CORE

Right from the start, customer service has been a core value. During the planning stage for the building, 24 focus groups covering issues as varied as disability strategy and furniture requirements were formed, with each group broken down into a further set of focus groups. In all, some 1,100 people had a say in the design of the building.

A business user group was also formed consisting of a senior representative of each of the business groups who could make decisions on behalf of their business group as the project progressed.

Service provision is today almost entirely outsourced, with most of the service providers brought in by Riggs prior to the completion of GSK House, to allow them to integrate with the new vision for the building. That vision was to create a building that could "support the

business in every aspect of what it needed to do and not just putting in facilities management services that could be used by customers," says Riggs.

Three years into the running of the building and a year after having seen all 16 service providers attain Investors in People accreditation, Riggs decided to 'turn over the stones' by bringing Graham Hardiman, managing partner of the Mystery Partnership to GSK House. The Mystery Partnership specialises in running 'mystery guest programmes' within the hotel sector, monitoring every aspect of customer service a hotel guest experiences, from reservation to checkout.

INDEPENDENT THINKING

"You can get too close to what is happening," says Riggs, who values the independent view that Hardiman provides. "[The Mystery Partnership] are doing this on a professional, full-time basis. We had used our own mystery shoppers with certain providers but you don't get the same independent thinking."

The mystery shoppers scrutinise every aspect of the visitor experience (see box 'Under Scrutiny'). Two shoppers are present at each visit – one to monitor the staff member's perception and the other, the visitor's, as the way these customers experience the building and its services can be very different.

Since 2002, when the programme was launched, a visit has taken place every two months. Findings of the most recent visit are compared to the last six in order to track both upturns and downturns in performance. Just under a year ago, the programme was altered to look more at soft skills, grooming and appearance. This

UNDER SCRUTINY

Facilities, services and aspects of service analysed by the mystery shopping team in their most recent report (January 2005) included the following:

- arrival at GSK House
- the shuttle bus service
- GSK House reception and reception security
- public toilets
- GSK House switchboard
- the touchdown centre (providing desk facilities for employees who are not permanently based at GSK House)
- the facilities management helpdesk
- morning and afternoon refreshment services
- the office service centre
- the restaurant at breakfast and lunch
- a reprographics request
- conference room booking
- the conference room
- conference room catering
- an audio visual request
- audio visual delivery
- a mail room request
- chauffeur booking
- the shop
- the hair salon
- soft skills, name badges, grooming and appearance.

followed feedback that reception – “very crisp, very alive, a fantastic experience when we started,” says Riggs – had become a little mechanical, with visitors being ‘processed’ rather than launched on a seamless journey.

POSITIVE PROVIDERS

The independence of the mystery shopping programme is, believes Riggs, the key to the very positive impact its results have had on GSK’s service providers.

“They use [the results] with their teams, probably in a stronger way than if it was something they had done internally because it has that independence,” he comments, adding that the data from the programmes creates a degree of competition among the providers and none have responded defensively to the results. The programme also appears to have encouraged closer working relationships.

“They all want to do their best. For them, it is a fresh pair of eyes from a different sector and a commercial view that is respected.”

As Hardiman explains, part of the programme was in fact designed to get suppliers working together: “Reporting on grooming, appearance and soft skills is incorporated in each area but it is also reported on globally within the report that covers the whole of GSK House. The programme therefore brings everybody into ownership of the issue of ‘friendliness’ and ‘welcoming’. They have an influence over the score within the whole of GSK House.”

But none of the results are of any use unless GSK chooses to do something with them. “That’s one of the things that we evaluate on an ongoing basis,” says Hardiman. “How many of the repeat issues come back time after time? They are in fact so minimal it’s quite amazing really. There may be another issue, but not the same one repeated.”

Perhaps the key benefit of using mystery shopping has been to keep the experience of GSK’s innovative street area fresh and exciting.

“We’ve got to keep this alive, 365 days of the year,” says

QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

The following are typical questions that are asked by the mystery shoppers and aspects of service examined to investigate service delivery on arrival at GSK House:

- The number of security staff in or around the Gate House security box that you could see. There should be two members of security on duty during the day.
- The number of other visitors or people doing business around the security box.
- When drawing up to the Gate House security box at GSK House, were you spoken to by a team member within 30 seconds of your arrival?
- Did the team member offer some form of greeting such as ‘Good Morning’ or ‘Good Afternoon’?
- Did the team member at the Gate House appear friendly and welcoming?
- Did the team member display a professional approach?
- Was the team member at the Gate House dressed appropriately from head to shoes? Please comment if negative.
- Were the directions and instructions given to you clear and concise, and easy to follow?
- Did the team member offer some form of parting greeting such as ‘Thank you’?

Riggs, whose team currently chooses not to publicise the improvements tracked by the programme. It has, however, helped to develop the team’s own profile, he says.

Riggs’ final piece of advice for anyone thinking of taking this approach is this: if you start on the journey it is a continuous one and it has to deliver value. “If it stopped doing that [delivering value] we wouldn’t continue. The challenge is how you keep the momentum going and which stones do you keep turning over.” ■

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- Short-list the five that you are going to do something about in the next four weeks.
- Repeat the process in a month’s time, reviewing progress and identifying all the little extras you have provided for your customers.

13. Attention to detail

The fine detail of customer service should always be near to perfect.

Tips for good service:

- Listen attentively to your customers. Take notes.
- Communicate effectively with service providers.
- Establish detailed standards and check they are being adhered to.
- Realise, overall, that detail is critically important.
- Never believe that striving for perfection is too costly.

Personal challenges:

- How often do you and your team get it right first time, every time?

- Establish a set of standards for every aspect of the services you provide.
- Check that any procedures are being adhered to.

14. Immaculate appearance

The appearance of everything the customer sees in your company should be immaculate.

Personal challenges:

- How do you think your team/company appears to your customers?
- Do you or your team/company really go out of your way to maintain the highest standards of appearance?
- Take one step to improve appearance in the eyes of your customers. ■

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