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## **Scam Alert – Mystery Shoppers Beware**

by Stacie Harris, Economic Crimes Unit

Mystery Shopping. Intriguing offers of free meals and merchandise. Who could pass that up?

Let me first preface this with, not all mystery shopping companies are bogus. There are some companies that are valid and you are able to obtain the free food and merchandise promised. Unfortunately, there are some companies and/or individuals that are exploiting this opportunity to take advantage of people. You just have to do your homework to find the legitimate company.

What are "Mystery Shoppers"? They are everyday ordinary people like you and I that become independent contractors. You are asked to visit the place of business and gather data for the management and owners of these businesses, such as customer service, how clean are the bathrooms, are the display racks zoned correctly, are the parking lots clear of shopping carts, are store clerks courteous, etc.? For this information, shoppers are promised money and/or free merchandise.

Lots of ads in the newspaper and/or on the internet make it sound like it is easy money. In actuality, this is not just another fun day at the mall. Basic skills are necessary and shoppers have to follow very explicit guidelines for obtaining the information. If these rules are not followed precisely, they will not pay the shopper for the work done.

Companies to beware of are the ones that require the shopper to pay an upfront fee for recruitment, training and necessary materials. These are the type of individuals that are only out for your personal identifying information.

Valid mystery shopping companies have a "Code of Ethics" through the Mystery Shopping Provider's Association, which they strictly uphold. They do not charge an upfront fee for the shopper to contract with their companies. These valid mystery shopping companies also have certification programs that the shopper completes in which he/she obtains what is known as Silver or Gold Certification. You will still have to provide some personal identifying information for tax purposes to the valid companies. This should only be done after you have done some research and know that they are valid companies. This can be done by contacting the Better Business Bureau at [www.bbb.org](http://www.bbb.org). Remember, if it seems to good to be true, then it probably is.

***~ IDENTIFY A SCAM BEFORE A SCAM IDENTIFIES YOU! ~***