



## Fake Mystery Shopper Ads Promise Money for Nothing and Gifts for Free

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MADISON – For people who love to shop or travel, nothing beats the prospect of free products, meals and overnight stays in exchange for completing a survey about a store, restaurant or hotel’s services. While such a job does exist, the vast majority of advertisements about these “mystery shopper” jobs are scams (and could leave you in dire straits).

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) has seen an increase in complaints about mystery shopper scams over the past month. Consumers are advised to be skeptical of advertisements and unsolicited emails promising work as a secret shopper.

The Bureau of Consumer Protection has recently received a handful of inquiries and five written complaints about fraudulent mystery shopper operations, with one of the complainants losing nearly \$1,000 in the scam.

All five complainants received a similar email solicitation. Two of the five received realistic-looking checks and were asked to deposit them into their bank accounts and wire a portion to another party. This is a common scam: the checks are fake and the consumer will be on the hook for any withdrawn and transferred funds when the bank discovers the forgery.

If you receive a similar solicitation for a secret shopper job, remember that:

- It is not necessary to pay money to get into the mystery shopper business.
- The “shopping certifications” offered in these ads and unsolicited emails are almost always worthless.
- Consumers who try to get a refund from promoters of mystery shopper jobs are typically out of luck. Either the business does not return phone calls or answers and tries another pitch.
- These solicitations are often fronts for fake check scams, with the mystery shopper’s first “assignment” being the evaluation of a money transfer service like Western Union or MoneyGram. Reject any request from a stranger to cash a check on their behalf and transfer a portion of that money to someone/someplace.

Some retailers do offer their more loyal customers an opportunity to conduct a “mystery visit” and to provide feedback in exchange for discounts or valuable coupons at their stores. Others hire marketing research companies to evaluate the quality of service in their stores, but the professionals in the field consider mystery shoppers a part-time activity, at best. And, they add, opportunities generally are posted online by established market research or merchandising companies. Again, be suspicious of pitches that appear in newspapers’ “help wanted” sections, in online classified ads or in unsolicited emails.

For additional information or to file a complaint, visit the Consumer Protection Bureau at <http://datcp.wisconsin.gov>, send an e-mail to [datcp hotline@wisconsin.gov](mailto:datcp hotline@wisconsin.gov) or call the Consumer Protection Hotline toll-free at 1-800-422-7128.

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