

# Case study



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Jane Cookson, Catering and Contracts Manager, Royal Horticultural Society



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## Client - The Royal Horticultural Society

The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) operates four Gardens - Harlow Carr in North Yorkshire, Hyde Hall in Essex, Rosemoor in Devon and Wisley in Surrey - that attract in the region of 1.3 million visitors each year. Although the 200+ year old Society is renowned for these, it is also passionate about its visitors' overall experience, and this includes its food and beverage operations.

Since 2006, RHS has been running a mystery dining programme.

A standardised questionnaire, developed by The Mystery Dining Company (TMDC) in conjunction with RHS staff and the contract catering firms who run the food and beverage operations, is used. The assessors' findings, which include a mix of scored results and observations, are then shared to ensure continual improvement to its service provision across the different venues.



## Challenges

- Establishing benchmarks for service expertise without any key performance indicators already in place
- Creating a consistent visitor experience across different sites, run by different caterers
  - Maintaining standards and adequate supply in an environment where usage/demand is heavily influenced by weather
  - Monitoring day-to-day performance across different sites from a central head office

## Benefits

- Provides a regular, independent assessment of contractors' performance
- Creates a centralised way to monitor trends, across individual sites and the whole business
  - Reports can reinforce caterers own observations of site performance
- Facilitates focused discussions based on report findings and trends between TMDC, RHS and appointed contractors enabling issues to be addressed and improvements implemented with involvement from all parties

## Results - Through the operator's eyes

**Jane Cookson, the Catering and Contracts Manager at the Royal Horticultural Society, believes that the mystery visit programme has been crucial in gaining perspective and insight on the work undertaken by both appointed contract caterers and the in-house catering team.**

### All on board

*"Customer experience is important to RHS. We use mystery shoppers across other areas of our business, however, we recognised that to evaluate our food and beverage operations we would benefit from specialist insight. We have continued to be impressed with both The Mystery Dining Company and their assessors' level of knowledge, observations and recommendations."*



*"One of the main reasons for setting-up a mystery dining programme was to establish key performance indicators. Having qualitative measures in place has enabled us to assess performance and consistency across different areas of our catering operations.*

*We devised the programme and the questionnaires that the assessors use jointly with the catering teams. This was important to ensure that the assessors were looking at the right things and that we would genuinely learn from the reports' findings.*

*We review the reports across each site with the contractor and if a trend or potential issue is identified they are then tasked with working up an action plan. Our contract caterers and in-house team have embraced the programme and have been able to instigate changes to help improve operational processes and, at times, manage costs more effectively as a result."*



### Value for money

"We see mystery dining as a worthy investment for the Society. It helps to prioritise customer service in each of our food and beverage sites, establishing consistency and supporting the extension of own brand and reputation.

It is an effective way to identify trends as well as giving an indication of what is going on at the individual sites. As our business can be seasonal, mystery dining has enabled us to ensure that our service standards are consistently high during peak and low periods. We've also been able to learn more about demand and help to manage processes, supply and wastage better too, in turn helping to reduce costs."

*"The service is so personalised and responsive that sometimes I feel like I am their only client."*

Jane Cookson, Catering and Contracts Manager, Royal Horticultural Society

## Additional Support Network

*"One of the real positives to having a customer service programme in place is that it helps to put things into perspective.*

*The Mystery Dining Company has made it very easy for us to keep the programme flexible, allowing us to learn as much as possible about the operations. For example, we've been able to specify that assessors only visit on rainy days or on weekdays in order to evaluate customer service differences at peak and off peak times. This is something that has helped us to develop better staffing models.*

*Reaction times are very good too; they have been able to change things at short notice and if one of the catering team has a query about something within the reports TMDC will investigate it thoroughly and have a response for me very quickly. The service is so personalised and responsive that sometimes I feel like I am their only client."*

**Jane Cookson, Catering and Contracts Manager, Royal Horticultural Society**



**Sally Whelan, director at The Mystery Dining Company said:**

***"It is important that customer service remains high on the agenda in a contract catering environment and Jane was very clear about wanting a consistent approach across all sites in her initial brief to us. Working closely with all parties - in this case the client, RHS, and its suppliers - we have been able to design a programme that helps to achieve a uniformity and supply valuable operational insight."***

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