

# Convenience Store News

WHAT'S NEXT IN CONVENIENCE AND PETROLEUM RETAILING

## Daily News

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At Houston-based ConocoPhillips, a new mystery-shopping program launched in January 2007 so the company could answer these questions and more for its large network of sites, which includes 1,641 c-stores, of which 1,535 are franchised, according to the Convenience Store News 2007 Top 100 report.

"We've always had a mystery-shopping program, but it was separate from everything else. The Spirit of Performance program combines mystery shopping with a brand image program," said Kelvin Covington, manager of programs at ConocoPhillips.

Previously, the company had a monthly mystery-shopping program and an additional brand image program performed once a year, and worked with two separate companies to accomplish them.

"We wanted a combined service with more detail and a faster turnaround," Covington said. "We also wanted someone to provide metrics, trend reports and pictures online."

In January, the company found Shop'n Chek Worldwide Inc., based in Norcross, Ga., with a shopping network of more than 200,000 independent contractors, representing more than 300 unique job titles, according to Laura Livers, president of Shop'n Chek. "They were able to provide all we needed," Covington noted. "Before, the turnaround time was a week to 10 days, and now we get the information in three to five days."

Mystery shopping takes place at ConocoPhillips' locations four times a year throughout the U.S., except for the West Coast, which is six times per year, Covington said.

Shoppers evaluate customer service, cleanliness and branding, which includes the store interior and exterior, restrooms and fueling area. Following the visit, shoppers must complete an online questionnaire of about 35 questions within 12 hours.

"We can look at trends that have taken place on a particular question or at certain stores," Covington said. "We can look at store reports by region, account manager, sales manager or the U.S., and can slice it and dice it the way we want to."

The shopper is also required to take pictures at the site and upload them onto the Web. Each shopper takes an overall picture of the store, as well as some required brand elements that ConocoPhillips is tracking for compliance, but they also will take pictures of something incorrect in the store, such as a messy restroom, Covington said.

The most immediate benefit is tracking brand elements, said Covington, citing missing decals as an example. To quickly alert the store of the missing decals, the company, along with Shop'n Chek, developed Trigger Training, which delivers immediate Web-based training information to the manager of a station that failed a mystery shop, according to predetermined brand standards.

This information may include a branding guide, standards for customer interaction and links to necessary supplies discovered missing by the mystery shopper.

Each store pays \$52 for a shop, and as an incentive to pass the test, ConocoPhillips is running a program for the top 2,000 sites to get the fees refunded to them, he said.

Aside from the physical mystery shopping, Shop'n Chek also worked with the company to get additional feedback from customers. At the bottom of each store receipt a printed telephone number and Web site address, [www.gasvisit.com](http://www.gasvisit.com), invite consumers to call or log on to rate the store.

"As an incentive, we give away a \$2,000 gift certificate for gas each quarter to one grand prize winner and then a \$1,000 gift certificate to three other winners," Covington explained. "It has been great. We have not had customer feedback in this format before."

Customers enter their receipt number so it coincides with the specific site they visited and the data is collected and analyzed, he said. It can be analyzed separately or combined with the mystery-shopper data.