

THE HISTORY OF MSPA

*Authors: Mike Bare, Mark Michelson,
Veronica Karlsson, Aftab Anwar and Cristiani Oliveira*

History of the MSPA – Mystery Shoppers Providers Association

What began as an idea between two good friends evolved over the years into the leading global mystery shopping association also known as the MSPA. Here is the history behind MSPA.

The Founding Fathers

Meet Mark, CEO of Michelson & Associates out of Atlanta, GA. The internet was still young in 1996 and email was still a “mystery” in many people’s minds. When Mark found he had more shoppers than he could use, he began mailing out lists of shoppers to other mystery shopping firms.

Mike Bare, President of Bare Associates International in Fairfax, VA, was a recipient of one of those lists. Over the next few years, Mike and Mark talked on the phone with many other recipients of these shopper lists. Through this informal networking, sharing issues and stories about dealing with clients, shoppers and scams it was soon discovered that there was a much bigger issue at hand beyond sharing shoppers.

During a visit to Atlanta in 1997, Mike and Mark decided to work together to plan a meeting that would bring interested parties together to discuss creating an association for companies that provide mystery shopping.

The first large-scale meeting of companies that provide mystery shopping services was held at the Hyatt in Orlando Florida in February of 1998. The main focus was to discuss current issues and to address the future of mystery shopping. The conference consisted of breakout sessions with focuses on technical issues, professional standards/ethics, governance/recruitment and government relations.

At the end of the conference it became apparent we had two options at hand: 1. Form a special interest group under an existing trade association or 2. Create our own organization

focused on the mystery shopping industry. That February in Orlando, over 110 attendees voted and the MSPA was born.

The primary goal of MSPA was determined to be to promoting the use mystery shopping services around the world. Over the next few months an organizing committee worked hard to set up the foundation for the MSPA – including establishing a charter, creating a not-for-profit organization and selecting a management company to assist with membership, meetings and communications.

First Official MSPA Conference

The first MSPA conference was held in Dallas, Texas in fall of 1998 (called 1st International Conference of Mystery Shopping Providers). At that time there was only one chapter of MSPA. With just a little over 70 members in attendance that included a variety of business that provided mystery shopping from different angles such as training, promotions, merchandise, private investigation and marketing research firms.

With the initial vision to be one global association, the Dallas conference had companies from Japan, Europe and Canada in attendance. A board of directors was voted in that year with Mark Michelson given the seat of President and Michael Bare, Vice President, each would hold those seats for the first 2 ½ years. While the founding fathers vision was always focused on expanding globally, their first challenges began in the United States.

MSPA takes on the US Government

The first conference brought many items to the table including private investigator licensing and legislation issues regarding tax issues for use of independent contractors. At the time, many states required private investigation licenses for anyone who was doing any type of “observations”. California was the first state to bring action against several MSPA members regarding licensing – and MSPA members rallied and came to the rescue. MSPA hired a local lobbyist, and members gathered in California to debate the rules and regulations in the California Legislature. MSPA was successful at changing the licensing requirements to gain exemption for mystery shopping. Using this same lobbying model, and under the

stewardship of MSPA President Brad Worthley, MSPA was able to change the laws in many states across the United States so that we could conduct mystery shopping without licensing. Nevada is the only state that still requires all mystery shoppers to hold a private investigator license.

Like with any other growing industry, scams always seem to find their way into the mix. MSPA partnered with the United States Postal Investigation Service and took scammers on first hand by helping to identify potential scams and then testifying at hearings. MSPA was successful in helping to close down mailboxes of numerous scammers who were misrepresenting mystery shopping.

MSPA also worked closely with the Federal Trade Commission to help educate consumers about the realities and scams associated with mystery shopping. Today MSPA and our members continue to educate the public about scams and provide confidence that the members of MSPA are legitimate operations that can be trusted.

In 2016 MSPA North America and Latin America rebranded to MSPA Americas.

Certifications

As MSPA's membership grew so did the need for education programs and certifications. Under the capable leadership of MSPA President, Mike Green the first shopper certification program was established that not only assisted in educating their shoppers but also created a funding program for the organization.

Expansion into Europe

In 2000, while the MSPA was dealing with licensing, legislation and tax issues in the US, Europe had it's own unique issues to confront – including building recognition for an emerging industry. 25% of the MSPA members were from outside of the USA and the European companies felt a need develop the European market and to meet locally instead of flying to USA for all conferences.

Veronica Boxberg Karlsson sent a request to MSPA to create a separate MSPA entity in Europe. 30 members and potential members met in Belgium for a formation meeting to establish a new chapter and decided there was enough interest to create MSPA Europe with its' own board of directors and operations.

However there was resistance from several European members to form a separate European chapter as this would increase the competition in the European market. Luckily the European chapter could be formed with assistance of all the founders and board members.

One of the first achievements was to create more detailed guidelines for members and in 2003 Europe introduced the first guidelines as well as a short abstract which now is available in more than 30 languages.

MSPA Europe grew quickly under the capable leadership of founder Veronica Boxberg Karlsson and is still growing under the professional leadership of the following presidents and boards. During 2010 & 2015 the European board has been in charge of the development of the new MSPA web site and new image which is truly geared towards a Global audience.

Expansion into Asia Pacific

In the year 2004 after having seen Europe develop into a successful Region, Aftab Anwar from Startex Marketing Pakistan made an effort for the creation of Asia Pacific Region. Contacts were made all over Asia Pacific Region and in November 2004, 16 companies gathered in Bangkok and formed MSPA Asia Pacific Region.

The business of Mystery Shopping is slowly gathering momentum in the Region and MSPA is playing its part of creating awareness of its importance and benefits by conducting Conferences and Workshops.

Companies from emerging markets like China, India, Korea, Japan, Singapore, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, and from Middle East and other parts of Asia have taken up membership.

Annual conferences attract many non members who later join once they see the advantages of being part of the group. The region has shown steady growth and is expected to keep growing in the years to come.

Global Board

Expanding into Europe and Asia brought on many challenges including finding a way to bridge the gap between the independent MSPA organizations – each of which had their own board of directors and ideas about branding and promoting mystery shopping. In 2005, a Global Board was created in order to foster cooperation between the chapters, share the great ideas generated by each chapter with other chapters, keep standards consistent, set geographic boundaries for members, assist with conference scheduling, help fund new regions and ensure consistent branding throughout all MSPA communications.

Currently there are four Regions, North America, Europe, Asia Pacific and Latin America. This division is important in view of different Legal, Cultural and historical perspectives of each Region. Each Region has a separate Board of Directors governed by a Global Board which was setup in order to move forward through combined efforts and strategy. Its mission includes developing, maintaining and strengthening the mystery shopping industry throughout the world through joint efforts and actions.

It is the goal of Global Board to improve and stimulate the acceptance, performance, reputation and use of mystery shopping services, internationally.

The Global Board supervises the stewardship of the MSPA logo, MSPA brand, the global strategic planning and positioning of the Association. Specifically, the Global Board has the authority to 1) arbitrate disputes among regions, 2) devise and enforce global ethical standards and 3) promote new region formation.

The Global Board consists of 2 members from each Region and the four Founders.

Branding the Dream

In 2010, Veronica Boxberg Karlsson introduced consistent branding for all the MSPA chapters that included new logos, website and newsletter structures that not only will foster growth throughout the regions but also promote mystery shopping worldwide.

In 2011 a new step is given: The release of reviewed Guidelines for Mystery Shopping, Ethics agreement for members and Ethics agreement for shoppers.

What began as two men and an idea has since materialized into a true global association with quality members who continue to set high standards for the mystery shopping industry. With over 450 members to date and a chapter formed in Latin America (with the efforts from Mike Bare and Stella Susskind), MSPA is still growing and responding to member needs around the world.

The goals for the association have not changed – MSPA still exists primarily to promote mystery shopping services around the world. This includes setting standards as well as educational programs to improve professional standards and ethics, providing support for promoting our members through the MSPA website and conferences, dealing with local issues through the regional entities and helping to foster sharing and learning opportunities among our members.

The MSPA is the representative Trade Association for companies participating in the Mystery Shopping industry. It is the goal of the MSPA to improve and stimulate the acceptance, performance, reputation and use of mystery shopping services worldwide.

MSPA would like to acknowledge the work done by several people, especially to the Founders, Presidents and Former Presidents of each region, who volunteered their time and gave a great contribution to the industry:

Founders:

MSPA: Mark Michelson and Mike Bare
MSPA Europe: Veronica Boxberg Karlsson
MSPA Asia-Pacific: Aftab Anwar
MSPA Latin America: Stella Susskind

Current Presidents - Regions:

MSPA Americas: Mike Mershimer
MSPA Europe: Yvonne Kinzel
MSPA Asia Pacific: Ermina Yulianti

Current Global Board:

Rich Bradley, Chairman (Americas)
Yvonne Kinzel, Vice Chairman (Europe)
Aftab Anwar (Asia-Pacific)
Jim Chong (Asia-Pacific)
Saidul Haq, Chairman (Asia-Pacific)
Mike Mershimer (Americas)
Mike Bare, (Americas)
Mark Michelson (Americas)
Veronica Boxberg Karlsson (Europe)
Jill Spencer (Europe)

Former Presidents of MSPA (Before chapters):

Mark Michelson
Vickie Henry
Mike Bare
Brad Worthley
Mike Green
Jeff Hall
David Rich

Former Presidents MSPA North America:

Tom Mills
Christopher Warzynski
Judi Hess
Elaine Buxton
Lynn Saladin
Stan Hart
Rich Bradley

Former Presidents MSPA Europe:

Veronica Boxberg Karlsson
François Leaute
Patricia Bas
Harvey Gilbert
John Farrell
Oksana Aulchenkova
Cristiani Oliveira
Nigel Cover
Adrian Barbu

Former Presidents of MSPA Asia Pacific:

Aftab Anwar
Naresh Mehta
Steven Di Pietro
Peter Roger

Former President of MSPA Latin America:

Mike Bare
Stella Kochen Susskind
Myriam Monetti