

## Introduction

How many times have you avoided shopping downtown because it was inconvenient? How many times have you been “turned off” or even left a store vowing never to return because of the attitude or indifference of a store employee? And, more often than not, instead of complaining to the manager, you probably complained to other potential customers like your family and friends. In today’s competitive retail environment, maintaining customer satisfaction and providing quality service are key factors in the success of small businesses. Specifically, small businesses need to evaluate strengths and weaknesses to remain viable and meet long-range business goals.

## The Program

Like the mystery shopper programs conducted by consulting firms for large retailers, restaurants, and hotels, the Independent Retail Assessment Program (IRAP) applies a customer-centered approach to assessing the strengths and weaknesses of small retail enterprises by providing information about their shoppers’ impressions and experiences.

If you are working with retail business owners interested in constructive feedback about their business, the IRAP is for you. If you are concerned about the viability of your downtown or about the

future of the independent retail businesses in your area, the IRAP will help you to better understand the factors affecting small, independent retail businesses and how retailers in your area can do a better job of competing in today’s market.

The IRAP materials examine various factors which have contributed to the decline of rural retail centers and why a customer-centered assessment is a useful way to provide constructive feedback to small, independent retail businesses. The program materials also discuss major trends in retailing, factors influencing retail trends, and strategies to help local small businesses be more competitive. IRAP provides a step-by-step method for getting constructive feedback from customers to retailers.

## Program Objectives

The objectives of the IRAP program are:

- to increase the competitiveness of independent retail businesses,
- to provide retail businesses with information about consumers’ impressions and experiences,
- to recommend actions to be taken to strengthen the competitiveness of participating businesses, and
- to recommend action steps to be taken by local chambers of commerce and other local community development organizations.

## Program Process

The program is done in several stages. In stage one, the program organizer promotes the program and signs up firms. In stage two, the program organizer recruits volunteer shoppers to visit participating retail businesses. In stage three, the volunteer shoppers make unannounced, anonymous visits to participating retail businesses. In stage four, the program organizer analyses the shopper’s reports and compiles a summary report with recommendations for action by participating businesses and community leaders. In stage five, results of the assessment are reported back to the businesses by the program organizer, and selected aspects of the findings are brought to the broader community for consideration and action.

## How We Help You

We identify people who will pose as anonymous shoppers, collate the shoppers’ impressions into a single report and separate reports for participating businesses, pay for film and processing. We also meet with each participating business to discuss the findings and suggest potential strategies. A program fee helps us cover our costs. The fee amount will depend on the number of participating businesses.

## For More Information

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Look for the Fairs & Festivals Program at our website:  
<http://www.wvu.edu/~agexten/crd/firstimp.htm>

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# *Independent Retail Assessment Program (IRAP)*

*Helping Small Businesses  
Stay Competitive*



**West Virginia University  
Extension Service**  
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Natural Resources, &  
Community Development

*Helping You Put Knowledge to Work*