

Tips for Picking the Right Contractor

You may be a do-it-yourself kind of person. However, do you know the permitting process? Will your prospective new home or home improvement project comply with all local building codes? Can you afford your own on-the-job training? Do you have the time, expertise, and money to pay for your own mistakes?

If you are not confident in your answers to these few questions, you need to hire a professional. Understanding the construction process is the key to hiring a good contractor, and not one of those fly-by-night folks who give the construction industry a bad name. Don't be afraid to do your own sleuthing. Before hiring someone, thoroughly research your project and the contractors you're considering working with. Here are some tips to get you started:

- **Know the Scope of Work**
If your project will involve an architect, make sure the plans are finalized before the start of the project. Many contractors work with architects to create what is called a "negotiated contract." This helps you decide what you want included in the job and at what price. Knowing the price of each architectural item (a volume entry, for example, or an extra bedroom) will help you decide whether to include it in the plans.
- **Be Clear About Budgets**
Know your budget and communicate it ahead of time to everyone involved in the project. Letting the contractor know your budget helps him/her save time in creating the estimate and determining what is acceptable if changes are required. Expect changes. Most contracts include a minimum of ten percent additional costs due to changes during the job. Be sure to include that amount of money in your budget.
- **Know the Contractor**
Qualify potential contractors before wasting their time with the estimating process. A great bid but a poor job record is not going to get you anywhere. This is why it's so important to ask for and check references (which is detailed below). Limit the bidding process to no more than three contractors. This will give you time to research and determine the contractor who is best suited to your project.
- **Don't Put on Price Blinders**
After you've qualified the contractor, review the estimated project price but don't let that be the only criteria for the job. Obviously, consider quality work and the harm that may come if the job is done "cheaply." Also, consider the quality of the contractor's business operations. It's an indication of the type of relationship you'll have with the contractor and the customer service he or she likely will provide.
- **Proceed**
Once you've selected your contractor, let the person do his or her job! Stay informed and make timely decisions when requested. Pick a plan, stick with it, and don't change your mind every five minutes. Changes cost money, and clients are often their own worst enemy during the job's progress. Finally, trust the relationship you've created. In the end, the goal is to be happy with the finished project.

Crucial Questions to Ask Your Contractor

- √ What is your company's best quality?
- √ How long have you been in business?
- √ Have you done this type of project before?
- √ Is this project within the typical scope, size, and price of the jobs you've done?
- √ Are you licensed, bonded and/or insured?
- √ May I interview two past clients and view the finished work?
- √ Have you been sued by past clients?
- √ Have you been sued by trade contractors or vendors?
- √ How do you determine how much to charge for change orders?
- √ On average, how much do the total change orders cost as a percentage of the original estimate?
- √ What process do you use to communicate change orders or price changes?
- √ Who will be my primary contact during the job?
- √ On average, do you go below or above your estimates?