



1. Choosing the Right Contractor!

Few decisions will affect the course of your project like the selection of your contractor. A good contractor will use his experience and communication skills to make sure things go smoothly, ensuring that you get the service and quality you want. Before you make any phone calls, put some thought into both your project and your budget. With your ideas written down and a few rough sketches, you'll feel more comfortable and confident. Have the same information available for each contractor. Don't change the project between interviews or price comparisons will be meaningless. If service is important to you, now is the time to pay attention.

Compare your contractors carefully!

Q: Do they return your phone calls promptly? Very Important!

Nothing says more about a company than how they deal with returning their phone calls and staying in-touch with the homeowner.

Q: Do they stick to their appointments?

Things always seem to come up when they are least expected, sometimes it can't be helped. One missed appointment is acceptable, as long as the contractor contacted the homeowner prior to missing the appointment.

Q: How is the presentation?

Product knowledge is hard to fake. Be sure to ask as many questions as you need to, and expect real informative answers.

Q: Has the contractor bid the job you want, or the one he would like you to do?

A good contractor will listen, figure out your goals, and advise you on how best to accomplish them.

Q: Does your contractor inspire the proper confidence?

He will have some good advice. His experience may tell him that there is another, easier, more cost-effective way to do the job, which can give you more job for the buck.

Q: Do you like him?

Good contractors are never pushy and won't laugh at your ideas.

Q: Can you trust him?

The person you hire will be working in your home around your family, your private possessions, and will most likely have a key to your house.

Have an open mind and listen, his experience is what you are paying for. Get three or four estimates on a major project, two for smaller jobs. Fewer estimates won't properly compare product and prices, and anymore is unfair to the contractor. Nobody has an unlimited amount of money, but choosing the lowest bid can lead to a catastrophe. The majority of problems that plague home improvement contractors are a direct result of underbidding a job.

Tip: If a bid is seriously lower than another, ask that contractor why. Also, be sure to ask the higher bidders why they charged more. Sometimes their reasons make a lot of sense.

You may be spending a large amount of money on this project, and having work done on your home is a highly-charged emotional event. Be prepared to make changes in your life and accept the fact that every project will have minor problems and setbacks. While almost no project goes exactly as planned, if you take the time to choose a contractor you can easily talk to, with proven experience and a reputable track record, everything will work out the way you wanted.

2. How much will the project cost?

The first thing you should discuss with any contractor is how much you can afford to spend. Sharing this information can be scary. Keeping it to yourself can only lead to frustrations later-on. Especially if someone shows you plans that solve every problem on your wish list, but make mincemeat of your budget. Good contractors know the only way they will earn your business is by developing a plan that meets your remodeling goals and your budget constraints.

So, first you need a budget, then pick a good contractor. Friends and neighbors who have recently completed similar projects can be good sources of information about how much money it will cost. Many contractors will happily share ballpark planning numbers with you as well.

Tip: Try to set your improvement budget at least 10 % to 15% under your real budget to allow for add-ons and additional changes. You can always find other ways to spend it after the project is finished.

3. Contract basics and what it should include.

Once you've agreed on a bid with a contractor; get it in writing, it should include the following:

- The total amount of the contract and a schedule for payment.
- An exact description of all the work to be performed, including as many details as possible, and a written understanding on how any future changes will be handled.
- If it is a major project your contractor should provide a blue print, floor plan, or sketches showing what sections of your home will be remodeled, describing exactly what will be done.
- A list of the materials to be used which defines brands, models, sizes and colors, and the respective warranties for each product.
- Insurance information for the contractor, his employees, his subcontractors, and his work.
- The length of your contractor's warranty and exactly what it covers.
- Clean up provisions, especially if a good deal of debris will be generated.
- Who will get the necessary building permits if your project requires them.
- The time table of your project, with starting and expected completion dates.

4. Timing your project with your life!

A modest bathroom remodel can take as little as several hours to design and another week or so to build. Major remodeling projects however, can take as much as six months or longer to get from the designing stage to actual completion. Except on the simplest of projects, prepare to meet with your designer as many times as possible to iron out details and don't be surprised if there are a number of interim phone conversations as well.

Tip: Don't expect work to begin immediately. Your contractor may have other jobs to finish before he can start yours. If you are remodeling your kitchen, it can take six weeks or more to get kitchen cabinets and it often takes three weeks or more for windows to arrive once ordered.

5. How long will actual construction take?

A rough rule of thumb is that most jobs take a week for each \$4,000 to \$6,000 of work. Thus, you'll live with construction crews for two to four weeks on a typical kitchen remodel, or two to three months on a \$50,000 addition.

Tip: Don't expect to see full crews of workers at your home every hour of every workday. On most jobs there is a flurry of activity early as work crews do the rough, quick work of demolition and framing. Later, as workers wait for drywall compound, paint and other finishes to dry, work proceeds at a much slower pace.

6. Dealing with glitches. - Tips on making them easier.

On every job there will be mistakes and surprises. Dealing with them will involve decision making on your part. It is best to maintain close contact with your contractor so they know as quickly as possible when something doesn't look quite right.

The best way to do this is to schedule a daily or weekly meeting with your contractor or lead carpenter. To make these daily and weekly meetings productive, take a close look at each day's work after the work crews have left for the night.

Tip: If something is wrong, by all means bring it to your contractor's attention as quickly as possible.

It's better to deal with job site surprises calmly. Few construction site mistakes are intentional, they're often the result of a mix-up in communication by the workers. If you don't like the way something looks once your plans start coming to life, ask yourself if you can live with it, if you can't, you'll probably have to pay for any changes. What if you get an irresistible urge, as the project progresses, to add more bells and whistles? That's why contractors carry around a stack of change order slips in addition to their standard contracts.

Tip: Such changes or additions may cost you less if you mention them early in the job. It is more likely that your contractor hasn't started on the work he will have to modify.

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