

Hiring a Contractor: Ask the Right Questions



It may seem like a good idea to be your own general contractor. However, if the job is substantial, it might be in your best interest to hire a professional, especially if you have a day job. Good general contractors are worth the money because they have the tools, know-how, and time to get the job done.

[Hiring a contractor](#) is the most important step in the home improvement process. It can ensure you have an enjoyable experience, making good use of your time and money. In order to find the right contractor, there are certain questions you should ask and steps you should take to help you make a decision.

A professional remodeling contractor will have an established track record as well as a client list. They are capable of any type of remodeling project within his/her niche, regardless of size (though some contractors deal specifically with commercial construction, while others focus on residential). Typically, they do not have a design background, and will not make recommendations relative to the “look” of the job. For information on decorating aesthetics, consult an interior designer.

Before you begin, remember this: DON'T have the work done on a T & M (time and material) basis. This can lead to wasted time and money if the project takes longer than estimated.

Once you create a list of potential contractors ([need help finding contractors?](#)), it is very important to not only ask the contractor questions, but to also find references and past customers of the contractors you are considering. When you make contact with these prospective contractors, ask for three names of satisfied customers. Once you have a list, sit by the phone with a pad and pencil, ready to jot down answers to your questions.

Don't assume that just because these references were given, that they will only say good things and that you therefore don't have to call.

MAKE THE CALLS.

“Hi, my name is _____ and I’m considering hiring _____ for an upcoming renovation. He gave us your name as a reference. Would you mind spending a minute to tell us about your experience with him?”

Once they oblige, here is a list of pertinent questions:

Was the supervisor in the field an owner or employee?

Was he there all the time, or part time?

What was his name? (Get first and last – there might be 2 Johns working there).

Did he have the opportunity to make any problem-solving suggestions? Tell me about them.

Did they protect the unaffected parts of the house from dust and dirt?

Did they clean up after themselves daily? (Piled up construction debris is not only unsightly, it’s a safety hazard.)

Did they store materials out of the way?

Did you ever see beer bottles or any sign of alcoholic beverages on the job? What about cigarettes?

Did they start and finish when they said they would?

If the person answering seemed excited and overly complimentary of the supervisor or the company, note it.

When you're finished with those calls you should have a pretty good idea who you prefer to work with. When calling the contractor, pay attention to how the phone is answered. Was it answered by a person or a machine; promptly or not; if you left a message, did someone call you back within 24 hours? You want to deal with people that are easy to reach and responsive.

The clients who had problems hired the wrong contractor for their project. It is very important for you to hire the right contractor for the scope and size of your project, and your personal needs for communication. Everyone has an individual communication style, and different requirements for being kept informed about their project.

Your decision about who to hire should be based on compatibility of personalities and communication styles, because these people are going to be in your home for days, maybe even weeks and months. If you decide to hire a large company for your project, you should meet not only the owner, but also the project manager and field supervisor.

Here are some tips to help you achieve great communication on your project:

Establish expectations and ground rules with everyone very early.

Maintain a convenient notepad so you can write down questions as they arise.

Remember to date them.

As they're answered, check them off.

Schedule regular jobsite meetings with the contractor and/or project manager to review progress and answer questions.

Discuss action items and deadlines.

The best experience comes from being prepared. You're not a mind-reader, and neither is your contractor or project manager. It's important to keep all lines of communication open and free-flowing, to ensure the best results for everyone involved in your project!