

remodeling?

HOW TO SELECT A CONTRACTOR AND WHAT TO EXPECT

— by Kip Bohachek, Plans Examiner

Selecting a Contractor

Besides a good design, the most important aspect of a successful remodeling project is selecting the right contractor. You need to select a firm that 1) has the skill to do a quality project in a reasonable amount of time, 2) will provide the best service within your budget, 3) will take care of you and your house. In short, you need to select a firm with which you are comfortable; one that gives you a high level of confidence in its ability to get the job done.

How to select your contractor:

- Get recommendations from friends, family or neighbors who have had similar projects done with satisfactory results.
- Contact local trade associations for contractor members. These associations have ethics guidelines and standards of practice that their members must uphold. These associations also have national certifications that require a committed effort to achieve.
— National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI), 937-222-6274.
— Home Builders Association (HBA), 937-298-2900.
- Contact the Better Business Bureau (BBB) at 937-222-5825 before calling a contractor. They can provide information about complaints against a contractor. Just as importantly, they can provide information about how complaints have been resolved.
- Get three estimates. Estimates should be clear and detailed. Be sure that all the contractors' bids cover the same scope and quality of work. Beware of a bid that varies from the plan or is significantly lower than the others. The old adage "you get what you pay for" is true for remodeling. Quality takes time and skill, and that often means more money.
- Ask for references from the contractor. Absolutely call the references. Ask lots of questions, and ask to see as many of their projects as possible. Most homeowners are happy to show off successful projects. Checking references and looking at projects similar to yours is the most important thing you can do prior to selecting a contractor.

Questions to ask a potential contractor:

- How long have you been in business?
- Are you a NARI or HBA member?
- Is your company a full-service firm? Can you do it all?
- Do you have employees or do you rely on subcontractors?
- Are any of your employees certified by NARI or HBA?
- Do you carry liability insurance and workers' compensation?
- How many projects like this have you done in the last year?
- When could you start this project?
- Will we need permits for this project?

What to look for:

- Company is known in your local area.
- Company has been in business over five years.
- Good standing with BBB.
- Member of NARI or HBA.
- Certifications: Certified Remodeler (NARI), Certified Graduate Remodeler (HBA).
- Proof of workers' compensation and liability insurance.

What to look out for:

- Acquaintance that is a "handyman."
- Someone who does the work on the side.
- Calling unfamiliar contractors in the phone book.
- Quick estimates.
- A very low estimate.
- Request for money up front.
- A post office box address.
- Telemarketers and door-to-door solicitation.
- A reluctance to get permits.

When you have made your selection:

- Make sure you have a clear contract that details the work to be done, the materials to be used, the quality of the work and materials, when the job is to start and when it is to be completed, a payment schedule, and how change orders and discrepancies will be resolved.
- Get a copy of liability insurance and workers' compensation.
- Ask to see the permit and city-approved drawings before work commences.

Surviving "Remodeling Meltdown"

You have selected the contractor, tweaked the design, signed the contract and the start date is approaching. The planning stage of your project is done. Although it is a relief to be on the verge of transforming your kitchen, basement or entire house into your dream space, the worst is yet to come.

Homeowner Meltdown

A remodeling project that lasts more than a day or two can become one of the most stressful ordeals you can go through. Even the best run project takes a toll on the homeowner. There is a point around 6 to 12 days into the project that I call homeowner meltdown when you really begin to wonder if you did the right thing. The contractor and his crew don't seem as wonderful as they were on day one. The project seems to have slowed to a painful crawl. In fact, there are days when nobody even shows up! The house is covered with a perpetual layer of dust. You have been eating out or washing dishes in the bathtub for days. The yard is so torn up that mud is even finding its way into the kids' beds. You can't find anything in the stuff you moved out of the way. And now the lead carpenter is telling you that the new refrigerator delivered yesterday is too wide for the allocated space in the cabinet layout. It's not easy, but realistic expectations and some preparation will get you through it.

Fair Expectations

Your opinion of the contractor is at a peak about the time you sign the contract. You have done your homework and selected a reputable and qualified guy to make your dream a reality. But as time goes by his rating slides. Remember, there is no magic construction wand. This stuff does not happen overnight. It takes a lot of effort to produce a quality remodeling project. The workers are not in their own office. They spend every day in someone else's space.



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They are often in a fishbowl being watched by homeowners, kids and neighbors. It is stressful for them also.

Quality takes time. Things go quickly at first. In pretty short order the foundation is in, walls are framed, the roof is on and doors and windows are set. At this rate you'll be done in a few days! Wrong. As a general rule of thumb, once the drywall finishing starts you are about half way there. All the finishes, interior doors, trim, cabinets, fixtures, floors, painting, tile, etc., take time. This is where the craftsmanship is most needed and most obvious.

Be prepared for the unexpected, it will happen. Scheduling is never smooth. Remodeling projects are influenced a lot by unpredictable forces: weather, sub-contractors, material delivery, cure time, and inspections. There are also those hidden surprises when the old walls and ceilings begin to open up: termite damage, rotten plumbing, hidden electric splices, sagging undersized headers, floor joists cut out for a laundry chute, and other poor workmanship from the past. There are many bottlenecks that can stop a project. There will not be something happening every day.

Prepare Yourself

Clear out the work area. Workers need some place to store materials. Framing lumber can be adequately protected outside. Drywall, doors, windows, insulation, trim, and cabinets need garage shelter and they can take up a lot of room. The workers also need room to set up saws, workbenches and other tools. It is typical for a two-car garage to be taken over completely by the remodeling project.

Arrange for easy access by the workers to electricity, water, phone and bathroom. A pot of coffee in the morning does not go unnoticed. The more you can do to make them feel comfortable and respected, the harder they will work for you.

Remodeling projects create a lot of dust. It is near impossible to keep the dust generated by drywall sanding from getting into the rest of the house, no matter how well the contractor seals things off. So, cover furniture, seal off heat registers, close off rooms not in use and pack up the knickknacks. And plan on hiring a good cleaning service at the end of the job.

Be Informed

Communication is probably the most important aspect of any project. Communicate with the lead person on the project every day. You will have questions for him, and he will have questions for you. Make sure you

have a pre-construction meeting with the contractor and lead carpenter and *ask questions*. Some decisions cannot be made prior to starting the project. Daily communication will keep everyone on the same page.

There are also a lot of decisions that affect the project progress. "Can we change that window to the other side of the door?" may be an easy question before the framing is complete, but a real problem once the siding is done. Changing a custom paint color may not be a big deal, but changing a custom tile order could cause some serious delays. Not all decisions can be made prior to signing the contract. Be prepared to make the appropriate choices when the time comes.

Check materials such as appliances, fixtures, cabinets, tile, doors, and windows when they are delivered to make sure it is what you are expecting and in good condition. If you are responsible for purchase and delivery of any materials, make sure they are on site in plenty of time. Also, don't try to save a dollar by buying "bargains." The carpenter cannot make a dream kitchen out of apartment grade cabinets.

Stay out of the way. Let the workers have the space and freedom to do their job. It is very distracting for them to work with interruptions from you, kids and pets. Don't expect them to be babysitters. "Neighborhood supervisors" are also distracting. I once had a job site next-door neighbor who thought it was his job to point out every missed nail. He also thought we would be pleased to hear his tip of the day about how he did his own remodeling project.

The Bottom Line

A good part of the satisfaction you will get from the remodeling project will come from the homework you did before hiring the contractor. "You get what you pay for" is as true for remodeling as anything else. If you picked the cheapest contractor you could find, then don't expect the highest quality workmanship or the best-run project. Quality takes time and skill, and that takes money.

If you do your homework, select a good contractor, have fair expectations, communicate effectively, prepare for the workers, and prepare your family, the overall success of the project will be much greater. Just remember, there will still be that morning somewhere near the end of the second week.....

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