

Choosing a Contractor You Can Trust

You might be, like many, wondering how to go about finding an honest, reliable, quality contractor to build your home or remodel it. There is a whole lot more to it than you might think. Here are a few ideas to add to your thinking about how to choose a contractor ... questions to ask, things to observe. Remember, it is not only the final product that you want to turn out right; you want the process to be understandable and even enjoyable!

Is the job I am considering similar in size and complexity to what the builder is used to doing?

You want to get an overall picture of whether or not you are talking to the right person.

Who will be doing the hands-on work? Employees or subcontractors? If subs, are they local and how long has the builder used them? Non-local subs *may* mean the contractor is just looking for the lowest price. If employees, how long have they worked for the contractor?

Who will be doing the day-to-day oversight of construction? Are you willing to deal with one person to sell you the service and then someone else to manage the construction? You may love the sales person, but you might not know who you will be dealing with for the hard part . . . construction. Who will be your contact person? What is their position in the company? How much authority do they have? How often will you be able to contact them? Will you be restricted in when you can visit your job site?

What kind of warranty will I get? Obviously you want to know what the written warranty is but also, how does it work out in the real world? For that you need to ask clients from at least 2 or 3 years ago... maybe even ten years ago!

How are change orders handled? Like warranties, you want to know what the written procedure is but also how it works during construction. Are the change orders written down and approved before the changes are incorporated into the work? That's likely to slow down construction. Does the contract include a provision for "changes on the fly" to keep things moving? Another very important question to ask previous clients is how fairly they were treated in changes.

What problems came up on previous jobs and how did the contractor handle them? Issues arise frequently in custom construction. The key is how a contractor addresses them. There is reason to doubt someone who has been in business for very long and says no problems have ever come up.

What does "custom home" mean to the contractor? How are choices made? How many options do you get? What sort of input will the builder offer? Does "custom" just relate to the product, or the process also?

Can I see a sample contract? Can I take it with me? This is a very important document. But don't think of it as an instrument to force someone to do what they would not otherwise do. That part should be covered by trust and integrity. The main purpose for the contract is to make sure that each party knows what to expect from the other. What will be delivered, what is, and is not, included. There should be two documents or two parts of one document: -- the agreement and the specifications. The specs are where most misunderstandings occur. The contract documents are mainly to make sure that communication is working. But realize that the contract is a proprietary document. If you are given a sample contract, do not show it to anyone else other than perhaps your attorney.

Check references. This is obviously very important but is probably the last thing to do. Ask previous clients if the contractor met their expectations. If they were to build again, would they use that contractor? Would that be an easy question for them to answer? If they'd do anything differently, what would that be? Did the contractor make suggestions during construction? If so, were all of them ones that *added* to the cost?

If problems arose, how did the contractor handle them? Ask if the homeowner felt treated fairly in the contract and in the changes. Ask how warranty issues were handled and if they felt the warranty was adequate. Ask the contractor's past clients if you can come by and see the actual work. Any contractor might offer to take you around to see some of his work; but it could be of interest to see some of the projects he *didn't* take you to see.

And one more thing about references. Frequently, you will hear the recommendation to get three-to-five recent client references. We feel that is inadequate, and here's why.

- **Why so few?** There might be reason to wonder if you get fewer than 6 or 8. If the list is short, ask for more.
- **Why just recent?** Most people who move into their new home are happy. At least for a while. But you want to know how long those people *stay* happy with their builder... and their home. Ask for references from some who have lived in their home at least 5 years or more.
- **Why just clients?** You want to know more than how a builder's past clients feel about him. You want to also be assured that this builder has good, honest business practices. Ask for a list of professional references also. You will want to talk to the subcontractors, suppliers, realtors, even lenders and any other professionals that you can think of. Call more than only those on the list. Ask them about the business practices of the contractor. Ask how quickly he pays.

How many bids? Frequently, you will hear the axiom, "you have to get at least three bids." This certainly may be good advice if you are buying a dishwasher or some other pre-manufactured item. But if you get three or more bids on your custom home, you are actually getting bids on three or more *different* custom homes. They may have the same plan, the same layout, and the same apparent look, but they will not be the same in many areas that are hard to see. In the competitive bid process, each bidder wants the job, so they want to be low bid. For that reason, wherever the specifications are ambiguous, or absent, that bidder is likely to bid the lowest price material or process. That may not be what you want in the house, and therefore you have set yourself up for a change order in the future.

What we suggest is to do a "competitive interview" with several builders. Ask them the questions listed above. Based on answers to these questions, you will be well served to work directly with the builder with whom you develop the best relationship and the most trust.

We hope you've found these questions helpful and hope that we have provided you with a useful tool for selecting a contractor. We hope you consider Cornerstone Builders in your selection process!

www.cornerstonebuilders.com

homes@cornerstonebuilders.com

