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How-To Hire A Contractor! [Family Circle Archive]

Family Circle Articles

No-Fail Guide to Hiring A Contractor

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Remodeling your house can be both rewarding and frustrating. The key to success is planning smart and hiring the right person for the job. Use our expert tips and handy checklists to avoid making costly mistakes.

Sooner or later, most home-owners need more living space for their growing families, or they might want to change their kitchen or bath-room. Higher mortgage interest rates, rising home costs and general economic uncertainty are some of the reasons why more and more people are deciding to remodel or add on to their current home instead of buying a new one.

If you're planning to remodel your house, be prepared for frustrations. What you'll surely remember is the dirt, the dust, the dirt and more dust. Even under the best of circumstances, your family routines will be upset for days, even weeks. And keep in mind that all contracting jobs take longer than anticipated and cost more than expected. You can easily add 10% to 15% to your original estimate.



How to Find The Right Person For the Job

Before you even begin to discuss your remodeling with any contractor, it is vital that you make some basic decisions about what it is you want done. Visit kitchen or bathroom showrooms. Visit neighbors who have had similar work done. Ask them lots of questions and write down their costs, problems and suggestions. Make sketches. Take measurements of appliances and fixtures you like.

Next, make a list and some rough drawings of the features you want to include in your new kitchen or addition. You need to determine how much you will have to spend both from available savings and what you'll be able to borrow. Then, and only then, should you begin to call on contractors to meet with you and give you bids on the work to be done. You should consult at least three contractors. Be certain they quote prices on the same list of specifications and materials. Be wary of very low bids - it could mean the job will not be completed to your satisfaction.

Ask each contractor for three recent jobs you can visit. Call those homeowners and ask permission to come see the completed job without the contractor being present. During these visits observe the quality of the work and ask the following questions about the contractor and the workers who were employed on the job:

- Did the contractors clean up each day?

- Did they finish on time?
- Were there many unspecified extra costs?
- Did the contractor readily return to correct any problems or finish detail work?

Evaluate the bids at your leisure. Don't be rushed by concern about a busy contractor's schedule, or the "threat" that "materials will be going up in price next week, so sign the contract now and take advantage of lower prices." This rarely is true. Once you've come this far, you are probably ready to choose the contractor and write a contract - a crucial, time-consuming task which must be done with care.

YOUR CONTRACT: What It Should Include

- Specifications and drawings of the design and materials to be used. (See our "Handy Home Remodeler's Checklists," so you won't overlook any important details.)
- Terms of financial obligations and schedule of payments.
- Procedural terms. Find out how the contractor will work: beginning and completion dates, overtime charges, etc.
- Ask about the contractor's insurance requirements and obligations. Who's responsible for fire, theft, liability, bodily injury, workmen's compensation and other kinds of insurance? You may have to take out special insurance.
- A detailed list of legal documents to be obtained before (permits) and after (certificate of occupancy, Underwriters Laboratories listing on electrical work, plumbing certificate, guarantees on equipment, etc.).
- Always include a "non-transfer" clause, so the contract cannot be assigned to another contractor with whom you have not dealt.
- It's also a good idea to include the following four clauses in your contract:
 1. Work required under this contract shall include but not be limited to: all labor, materials, equipment, appliances and services necessary to furnish and install all the items indicated herein, unless otherwise specified. If the contractor substitutes any item, a sample must be submitted to the owner, and written approval from said owner must be received.
 2. All work shall be performed to the best standards known' to the trade by skilled workers regularly engaged and specializing in the work they are called upon to perform. All work is to be in accordance with all applicable drawings, specifications, contract documents, local, state, federal codes or regulations.
 3. All material shall be new unless otherwise specified.
 4. The work shall be completed to the satisfaction of the owner(s) or their representatives before final payment.

Home Improvement: DO'S & DON'TS

- Don't give a deposit until the work begins. A start-up amount of about 10% is customary on the day the job commences, or when materials are delivered to the site. One exception: A deposit is generally required for kitchen cabinets, appliances and any custom-made shop work.
- Don't pay the contractor more than the value of the work completed to date. You'll have to become a good "guesstimator".
- Don't confuse friendliness with business. If you and your contractor become friends, it should be only after the job is finished to your mutual satisfaction. The contract should set the guidelines.
- Do make certain your homeowner's insurance will cover any accidents to workers on the job. You may have to take out special insurance just for the remodeling.
- Do avoid accusations between you and the contractor about stolen property. Put your valuables into storage.
- Do keep a remodeling diary to protect yourself from misunderstandings. Keep a daily log, describing what has been done, in your own words. Record conversations with the contractor as well as any promises you or the contractor makes. Don't skip lines or leave open spaces in your diary, since it could become a legal

document.

- Do document all the work in progress with photographs. They will help you recall the pleasure of seeing the before and after. And they will be available, if needed, in a contractual dispute. (We hope this won't be necessary!)

Handy Home Remodeler's Checklists

Bathroom Checklist	Kitchen Checklist	Other Areas
1. Tile	1. Tile	Floor:
2. Floor	2. Floor	1. concrete
3. Walls	3. Walls	2. tile
4. Ceiling	4. Ceiling	3. wood (hard)
5. Window(s)	5. Window(s)	4. carpet
6. Paint	6. Paint	
7. Wallpaper	7. Wallpaper	Walls:
8. Door(s)	8. Door(s)	1. plaster board (sheet rock)
9. Door hardware (locks & hinges)	9. Door hardware (locks & hinges)	2. paneling
10. Door bumper(s)	10. Door bumpers(s)	3. Ceiling
11. Ventilator (fan)	11. Ventilator (fan)	4. Trim (moldings)
12. Ground fault circuit interrupter	12. Ground fault circuit interrupter (s) (amount)	5. Window(s)
13. Wall electric outlet	13. Wall electric outlets (amount)	6. Paint
14. Telephone outlet	14. Telephone outlet	7. Wallpaper
15. Ceiling light	15. Intercom (with or without sound system)	8. Door(s)
16. Fixture with wall switch	16. Television outlet	9. Door hardware
17. Ceiling sun lamp & timer	17. Doorbell	10. Door bumper(s)
18. Heat lamp & timer	18. Ceiling light fixture with wall switch	11. Ceiling light fixture with wall switch
19. Toilet bowl (water closet)	19. Countertop light(s)	12. Wall electric outlets (amount)
20. Toilet seat	20. Electric clock outlet	13. 215-volt outlet (for air conditioning unit)
21. Toilet paper roll holder(s)	21. Refrigerator	14. Telephone outlet
22. Facial tissue dispenser (built-in)	22. Freezer	15. Intercom (with or without sound system)
23. Shower enclosure or type of bottom or pan	23. Dishwasher	16. Television outlet
24. Shower door	24. Garbage disposal unit	17. Heating unit or element
25. Shower valve body	25. Garbage compactor	18. Air conditioning (central or wall unit)
26. Shower head	26. Range (gas or electric)	19. Electric service amps
27. Shower hose sprayer	27. Oven (gas or electric)	
28. Shower safety bar	28. Microwave oven	EXTERIOR
29. Shower soap dish	29. Built-in toaster oven	1. Hose
30. Shower seat	30. Steam cooker	2. Electric outlet
31. Steam generator	31. Cabinets	3. Ground or building lights
32. Vanity cabinet	32. Cabinet hardware	4. Lamppost
33. Sink	33. Broom/utility closet	
34. Sink valve body	34. Countertop	Foundation:
35. Cut-off valve under sink	35. Butcher block top	1. concrete
36. Sink shampoo sprayer	36. Sink	

Bathroom Checklist	Kitchen Checklist	Other Areas
fitting		
37. Sink soap dish	37. Valve body (single or dual)	2. concrete block
38. Sink tumbler & toothbrush holder	38. Under sink cut-off valve	3. brick
39. Tub	39. Spray hose	4. wood
40. Tub valve body	40. Soap dispenser	5. Water or damp proofing
41. Tub safety bar	41. Instant hot water unit	6. Concrete floor (basement or crawl space)
42. Sliding doors for tub shower	42. Instant ice water unit	7. Outside cellar door
43. Shower curtain rod	43. Filtered water dispenser	8. Insulation (R-factor, thickness in inches)
44. Tub soap dish	44. Carbonated water dispenser	9. Ventilators (at least two in each crawl space)
45. Towel racks & closet	45. Built-in can opener	
46. Robe hooks	46. Built-in food warmers	Exterior facade:
47. Clothes hamper	47. Built-in knife sharpeners	1. brick
48. Mirror	48. Built-in knife rack	2. stone
49. Medicine cabinet(s)	49. Built-in paper, plastic wrap & aluminum foil dispensers	3. stucco (cement coat)
50. Heating unit or element	50. Heating unit or element	4. metal siding (aluminum or steel)
51. Septic tank addition (if required by code)	51. Septic tank addition (if required by code)	5. vinyl siding
		6. clapboards (wood)
		7. plywood
		8. asbestos shingles
		9. wood shingles
		10. Gutters & leaders
		11. Roof (flat or pitched)
		12. Finishing (trim moldings)
		13. Doors
		14. Storm windows
		15. Shutters
		16. Hardware (locks, latches, stops, & Hinges)
		17. Ventilator (attic or cockloft)



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