

Picking a Contractor

How to guarantee that your home building project is a rewarding experience

Top 10 questions to ask your General Contractor:

1. Does the contractor have references?

Make calling the contractor's references a priority.

Satisfied customers are probably the most important thing to consider when qualifying a contractor. Don't just get the references. CHECK THEM.

Questions to ask previous customers:

- Were they satisfied with the work?
- Was the work finished within a reasonable time?
- Did the contractor return phone calls?
- If the person had problems with the contractor, ask how the contractor responded to complaints.

2. Can I look at examples of the contractor's work?

Check the contractor's work.

Go and tour a previous job and see for yourself!

Check for details. Does the overall job look clean and detailed?

3. How much will it cost?

Don't automatically accept the lowest bid.

The old saying, "you get what you pay for" applies here. A higher bid may be worth the price in better materials, workmanship and reliability.

If you get a very low bid, the contractor may have made a mistake or forgotten to bid everything. If they have bid too low to make a profit, they may use cheaper materials or take shortcuts.

A large number of the Contractors State License Board complaints filed against contractors are the result of homeowners taking the lowest bid and then being unhappy with the poor quality of work.

4. Does the contractor ask for up front money?

Don't pay for everything up front.



Be careful to keep the percentage of work completed ahead of the payments made for work completed.

Your written contract should spell out the exact schedule of payment to be made.

5. How does the contractor track the costs of the project?

The general contractor should have a detailed budget to begin the project.

As work progresses and changes occur and materials are picked, the contractor should provide a clear and concise accounting of all costs to date as well as an accurate projection of the expenses still to come.

6. How knowledgeable is the contractor?

Ask your contractor questions about your project.

Does he understand the unique character of your project?
Is he certified and up to date with the latest Green building practices?
Be sure the answers are to your satisfaction.

7. Will the project have supervision?

How committed is the contractor to hands-on supervision throughout the entire project?

On site supervision ensures fulfillment of your exact specifications. It is this level of competence that solves problems before they arise, saving valuable time and money.

8. Will the contractor be reliable, keep appointments and return your calls?

The General Contractor needs to be accessible.

Who can you call with questions once the project starts?
How can you contact the contractor if there are problems?
You, the client, should not have to contact the various workmen and subcontractors. You should only have to make one call – to the general contractor! He/she should handle all the details.

9. Does the contractor have a warranty?

The warranty should be in writing.

Be sure the contract states any warranties against defects in workmanship, in writing. The warranties should state the period of time covered and what is and isn't covered.

10. Is the contractor licensed?

The contractor should be licensed with the California State License Board.



Ask for a current license number or get it from their business card or advertisement.

Check with the CSLB to make sure the contractor's license is currently active. You can also check their surety bond and complaints filed against the contractor.

Check online at www.cslb.ca.gov/ or call 800-321-CSLB.

Ultimately, the best builder or remodeler for you will be one who listens, asks and answers questions, has a great track record, is organized, is in tune with your style and tastes, and stays in touch.

Top 10 questions to ask yourself:

1. Do I need a General Contractor?

Unless you're an experienced builder with the time and skills to do it right, you'd be wise to hire a licensed general contractor.

Think carefully before becoming an owner builder. If you decide to be your own general contractor, you (and not the people you hire) are responsible for the overall job. This may include payment of state and federal taxes, workers' compensation insurance premiums and other legal liabilities.

If the work requires more than two specialty contractors, you should hire a general contractor. Remodeling a kitchen, for example, usually requires a plumber, electrician, stone/tile installer and carpenter.

2. Am I confident in his/her expertise and ideas?

The contractor should be knowledgeable and experienced in the latest building materials and techniques. Encourage value engineering that does not detract from the style and perceived value of your project.

3. Does the contractor appear to have a genuine concern for my needs?

Voice your concerns. He should be willing to accommodate you. This is especially true when it comes to scheduling. Some jobs may require that you not occupy your home while work is in progress.

4. Can I communicate effectively with the contractor?

Does the contractor seem honest and forthright? A contractor may be a skilled craftsman. But if you can't communicate and the final job isn't what you wanted, you won't be happy.



You should be able to speak comfortably and frank with your contractor. This is important to avoid conflicts and confrontations as the job progresses.

Many disputes happen because people fail to communicate at every step of the project.

5. Does hiring the contractor feel right?

Your project should be an enjoyable experience and free of stress for you, the client. Use your intuition – if you don't feel comfortable, find someone else.

6. Do I have reasonable expectations?

Are you willing to be reasonable about unexpected costs that arise and let your contractor make a profit?

Can you be flexible if the job takes longer than expected?

Are your expectations so high that you will never be satisfied with the project?

Can you be reasonable and let the contractor work without calling all the time? Do you realize that he/she can't return your calls within minutes because of other jobs and a personal life?

7. How important is Quality to me?

A \$40,000 hammered-copper tub could provide great quality but would inflate the budget.

A family inherited a home and wanted it fixed up. Their standards were high and they wanted a place that would require little maintenance. They were more concerned that the doors would be working smoothly in 10 to 20 years than they were with saving money or rushing through the job.

A house-flipper will be happy if the siding looks good for a year, as long as the work is done quickly and inexpensively.

8. How important is schedule to me?

If you have a whole-house remodel, can you be out of the house for a year or do you need it done in six months?

A bookcase can be built and installed in one day, or it can be built in a week and installed over two days. From a quality standpoint, the two bookcases would obviously be very different.

A window restoration job can be done during filler days over the course of a couple of months at less cost than if you need it done in three weeks.

9. How important is cost to me?



If the budget is most important to you, it will be difficult to have quality cabinets delivered on a tight schedule.

Reusing an old tub sitting in the backyard would be cheap and expedient but wouldn't provide the best quality.

Stock pre-painted cabinets cost less and arrive faster, but quality will be sacrificed to some extent.

10. Do I understand the Priority Triangle?

As the client, you need to understand the balance of craftsmanship, efficiency and budget:

1. Quality: How well a product works.
How beautiful the craftsmanship is.
2. Schedule: How quickly the project is over.
3. Cost: This is relative to your affluence, but doesn't need too much further explanation.

Make sure that you understand that every decision will require prioritizing these three elements.

You'll usually only be able to control two of them. If you could only have two, which two would you pick?