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Five Questions to Ask Before Hiring a Contractor

You're ready to remodel but you want to make sure you get the best contractor for the job. Here's what to ask the candidates before you decide.



A local contractor with a reputation to uphold is your best option than one that called out of the local paper ads.

For all of the excitement of choosing plumbing fixtures, cabinets, and tiles for a remodelling project, the most important decision you make won't involve colour swatches or glossy brochures. It's the contractor you pick that makes or breaks the job. That choice will determine the quality of the craftsmanship, the timeliness of the work, and the amount of emotional and financial stress the process puts on you. To make sure you're getting the best contractor for the job, here are five questions to ask the candidates. If you can get word of mouth recommendations from someone you trust, that's a great place to start, then ask these 5 questions.

1. Would you please itemize your quote?

Many contractors prefer to give you a single, bottom-line price for your project, but this puts you in the dark about what they're charging for each aspect of the job. For example, let's say the original plan calls for the top of the range glass tiles in your bathroom, but you decide not to install them after all. How much should you be credited for eliminating that work? With a single bottom-line price, you have no way to know.

On the other hand, if you get an itemized quote, it'll show the costs for all of the various elements of the job—demolition, framing, plumbing, electrical, tile, fixtures, and so forth. That makes it easier to compare different contractors' prices and see where the discrepancies are. If you need to cut the project costs, you can easily assess your options. Plus, an itemized quote becomes valuable documentation about the exact scope of the project, which may help to eliminate any disputes later.

The contractor shouldn't give you a hard time about itemizing his quote. He has to figure out his total price line by line anyway, so you're not asking him to do more work, only to share the details. If he resists, it means he wants to withhold important information about his quote—a red flag for sure.

2. Is your quote an estimate or a fixed price?

Homeowners generally assume that the quote they're seeing is a fixed price, but some contractors treat their proposals as estimates, meaning bills could wind up being higher in the end. If he calls it an estimate, request a fixed price quote instead. If he says he can't offer a fixed price because there are too many unknowns about the job, then work with him to eliminate the unknowns.

“Have him open up a wall to check the structure he’s unsure about or go back to your architect and solidify or clarify the design plans”. If you simply cannot resolve the unknowns he’s concerned about, have the project specs describe what he expects to do—and if he needs to do additional work later, you can do a Variation order (a written mini- quote for any new work).

3. How long have you been doing business in this town?

A contractor who’s been plying his trade locally for 5 or 10 years has an established network of subcontractors and suppliers in the area and a local reputation to uphold. That makes him a safer bet than a contractor who’s either new to the business or new to the area—or who’s planning to travel to your job from 50 miles away.

You want to see a nearby address (not a PO box) on his business card—and should ask him to include one or two of his earliest clients on your list of references. This will help you verify that he hasn’t just recently hung his picture—and will give you perspective from a homeowner who has lived with the contractor’s work for years. After all, the test of a quality job, whether it’s a bluestone patio or a family room addition, is how well it stands the test of time.

4. Who are your main suppliers?

You’ve found a few potential contractors, you’ve talked to the happy former clients on each of their reference lists, now it’s time for one additional bit of homework: talking to their primary suppliers. There’s no better reference for a tiller, for example, than his preferred tile shop; for a general contractor than his favorite timberyard or home hardware centre; for a plumber than the kitchen and bath showroom where he’s on a first name basis.

The proprietors of these shops know a contractor’s professional reputation, whether he has left a trail of unhappy customers in his wake, if he’s reliable about paying his bills—and whether he’s someone you’ll want to hire. The contractor should have absolutely no qualms about telling you where he gets his materials, as long as he’s an upstanding customer.

5. I’d like to meet the job foreman—can you take me to a project he’s running?

Many contractors don’t actually swing hammers. They spend their days quoting new work and managing their various jobs and workers. In some cases, the contractor you hire may not visit the jobsite every

day—or may not even show himself again after you’ve signed the contract. So the job foreman or supervisor—the one who’s working on your project every day—is actually the most important member of your team.

Meeting him in person and seeing a job that he’s running should give you a feel for whether he’s someone you want managing your project. Plus, it gives the general contractor an incentive to assign you one of his better crews since you’re more likely to hire him if you see his A Team. If the contractor says he’ll be running the job himself, ask whether he’ll be there every day. Again, he’ll want to give you a positive response—something you can hold him to later on.

The subtleties of how to hire a contractor

It’s not only the answers to these questions that will help you judge potential contractors—it’s the way they answer them. Were they easy to talk to and forthcoming with details or did they hem and haw and make you ask more than once? Difficulty communicating now means difficulty communicating on the job later. But clear, timely and thoughtful responses—combined with terrific references, great completed work that you’ve seen, and a smart take on your project—may mean you’ve found the right pro for your job

All Independent Property Inspectors have a “Preferred Contractors List” that is freely available to all our clients. All these contractors have been pre-approved and guarantee to meet our strict guidelines (or they are removed from the list)

To find out more or get your home inspected call your local independent property inspector on **1800 17 88 22** or email info@ipi.net.au

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