

TIPS ON SELECTING A CONTRACTOR

Increase your chances of having a successful project by conducting qualifying interviews and following up on references and credentials. This will enable you to select a company you feel will provide the best all-around service available above and beyond the necessary construction skills. The following questions will help you establish a company's qualifications and help you find the right company for your job.

- **How long have you been in business?** Look for a company with an established business history in your community.
- **Who will be assigned as project supervisor for the job?** Also find out whom to contact if the supervisor is not available. Get exact names and phone numbers for all persons who will be involved in the project.
- **What is the time frame for starting the project?** Ask about work schedules. When do you estimate completion of the project? How early will you begin work? When do you normally stop for the day? Will I be contacted about delays or changes in the schedule? By whom?
- **What will be your approach to a project of this scope?** This will give you an idea of how the contractor works and what to expect during the project. Listen carefully to the answer. This is one of the big indicators of the company's work ethic.
- **How do you operate?** In other words, how is your firm organized? Do you have employees or do you hire sub contractors? If you do have employees, what are their job descriptions? You should know what parts of your project will be handled by staff, and which will be contracted out to independent contractors.
- **Is your company a full service or specialty firm?** If you are planning a small project, say replacing the bathroom plumbing, you may be better off hiring a specialty plumbing firm or a bathroom contractor. However, if your project involves multiple changes, entire rooms or additions, you should consult a full service or design-build firm.
- **Do you have design services available?** If you are considering a large or involved project, you will need design services. If the Contractor does not have design-build capabilities, you should consider hiring an architect. Depending on the size and scope of the project, you may need an architect or structural engineer.
- **Does your company carry workers compensation and liability insurance?** Ask for copies of the insurance certificates to verify coverage. The State of Florida requires that all contractors be licensed and insured. Be sure to ask for your contractor's registration and license, and then confirm the license number and expiration date with your local jurisdiction.
- **Are any of your company's employees certified?** Trade certifications are good indicators of dedication, professionalism and knowledge of the industry. Contractors are required to meet certain industry criteria to maintain their certification. Contractors and tradesmen are licensed by the State of Florida or by a County Certificate of Competency in their trade.
- **May I have a list of references for projects you have completed which are similar to mine?** The contractor should be able to supply you with a minimum of three references, including names, telephone numbers and addresses. As a follow up to this question, ask how long ago the project was completed and if the contractor can arrange a visit to see the finished job. You should also ask for professional references from suppliers or subcontractors to verify sound business practices.

- **What percentage of your business is repeat or referral business?** This will give you a good indication about the company's customer satisfaction. According to research conducted by National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI), most remodeling businesses attribute over 50 percent of their annual volume to customer referral; some even claim up to 90 percent or more of their total annual sales.
- **How many similar projects have you completed in the past 12 months?** This will help you determine the contractor's familiarity with your type of project. You should confirm that a good portion of those completed projects were similar to the type of project you are proposing.
- **Will we need a permit for this project?** All cities require permits for building projects. Failure to obtain the necessary permits or to arrange obligatory inspections is illegal. In some cases, if a project violates zoning law or some other regulations, it may even have to be demolished if there is no way to comply with the law. A qualified remodeling contractor will be conscious of the permit process, and ensure that all permits have been obtained before initiating any work.
- **May I have a list of your suppliers?** You may want to add calling the contractor's suppliers to your list of follow up actions. This will help protect you from mechanics liens for non-payment by the contractor. Suppliers also can be a source to establish credit history for the company.

Of the many questions you can ask during an interview, the most important question is one you must ask yourself: **"Do I feel comfortable with and trust the person I am about to hire?"** Your answer to that question should make the hiring decision a little easier.

Warning Signs

Avoid Contractors at all costs when:

- You can't verify the name, address, telephone number or credentials of the contractor.
- The sales person tries to pressure you into signing a contract.
- The company or salesperson says your home will be used for advertising purposes so you will be given a "special low rate".
- The builder/remodeler tells you a special price is available only if you sign "today".
- No references are furnished.
- Information you receive from the contractor is out-of-date or no longer valid.
- You are unable to verify the license or insurance information.
- You are asked to pay for the entire job in advance, or to pay in cash to a salesperson instead of by check or money order to the company itself.
- The company cannot be found in the telephone book, is not listed with the local Better Business Bureau, or with a local trade association, such as NARI.
- The contractor does not offer, inform or extend notice of your right to cancel the contract within three days. Law requires notification in writing of your Right of Recision. This grace period allows you to change your mind and declare the contract null and void without penalty (if the agreement was solicited at some place other than the contractor's place of business or appropriate trade premises – in your home for instance.)

In addition, be cautious when:

- Your questions are not answered to your satisfaction.
- You are given vague or reluctant answers.
- The contractor is not accessible.

