

FIX IT UP!

Bruce Turner

How to Hire a Contractor

According to state statistics, Californians spend more than \$39 billion on residential construction every year. That's a whole lot of contractors getting hired. Some are good, some aren't. Making sure you get the right one is hard work, but it's very, very important.

Before you hire, plan. Write out a "scope of work" detailing exactly what you want done, and prepare a targeted budget. Unless you can design it yourself, you may want to have an architect or designer draw up a set of plans, or you may want to work with a design/build firm that offers those services. The better the information you give a contractor, the clearer he can be on what's required to get the job done the way you want it. And the less likely you are to be a target for an unscrupulous operator who's just trying to rip you off.

So how do you steer clear of the bad eggs? The most obvious way to find a good contractor, of course, is through personal references. Ask friends and neighbors who they would recommend and why. Ask the architect who's designing your project, the realtor who sold you your house, the roofer who's replacing your shingles and the plumber who's clearing your pipes. Professionals know and respect other professionals. You can even go down to City Hall and ask the building inspectors. They may not be willing to endorse a specific contractor, but they can guide you away from the scam artists.

Contractors themselves also provide references, and it's a good idea to actually go and see the work they've done in someone's home if you can. But be cautious – a shady contractor will steer you to only his happiest clients, or perhaps even to people he's never worked for. That reference might be the contractor's brother-in-law or a drinking buddy who's in on the scam.

What I suggest to clients is that they find a friend or neighbor who's in the middle of a project. The excitement of planning and launching the project is long gone, and now there's a herd of strangers in the house finding problems and creating chaos – with the end still nowhere in sight. That's the time that really tests the customer/contractor relationship. And that, therefore, is the time to ask for a reference. Because if a homeowner is willing to give a positive review at this point in the project, it means things are on schedule, the workers are showing up and they know what they're doing. Now you've got a really strong recommendation in hand!

Before making a final choice, know your priorities. Obviously you want the perfect contractor – somebody nice who does top-quality work on time and on budget – but perfection is tough to find, so decide what's most important to you. Are you willing to have the project run longer than expected if the work is really good? How much does it bother you if the contractor is a half-hour late every day? What if he does top-quality, timely work but he's personally unpleasant? Factors like that should be considered.

Before signing any contracts, check with the Contractors State License Board – their website is <http://www.cslb.ca.gov/consumers/default.asp> – to make sure the contractor you're dealing with is licensed. Call the Better Business Bureau to check for any outstanding complaints. And ask for proof of worker's comp and liability insurance, so you won't be sued if a worker falls off a ladder on your property.

Finally, NEVER do business with somebody who just shows up at your door offering a fabulous repair deal, perhaps with materials left over from “a job we did up the street.” At best, he’s going to take your money and run. At worst, he could cost you your home. Slam the door. Hard.

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