



Taking the Guesswork Out of Choosing a Remodeler

For many homeowners, the new year brings with it thoughts of home improvement. Perhaps a new deck, a bigger kitchen, or even a three room addition. But then you hear the bad news — "remodelers" who accepted large down payments and then skipped town, and jobs begun but never completed. It's enough to make anybody wary.

The good news, though, is that by asking the right questions and looking in the right places, you can find a professional remodeler who will do an excellent job that both raises your home's value and makes it more enjoyable for many years to come. The National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) Remodelers Council offers the following suggestions to ensure that your remodeling job is smooth sailing:

Do not conduct business with any remodeler or contractor without first investigating his or her reputation and experience. Price alone is not an indication of the remodeler's competency or ability to complete your project.

When searching for a contractor, it is best to seek referrals from family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers who have had remodeling work done. Ask if they are satisfied with their project and with the contractor they hired. Also, check with local trade organizations, such as the local Builders Association or Remodelers Council for the names of members who offer remodeling services. Membership in these organizations indicates a remodeler's commitment to professional customer service and quality construction. It is also a sign that the remodeler is an established member of the local building community.

Check with your local or state consumer protection agency or Better Business Bureau to find out if any complaints have been filed against the remodeler that have not been resolved. However, do not automatically assume that if there is no record of complaints against a particular remodeler that there have not been any problems; it may be that such problems exist, but have not been reported.

Check with your state's licensing agency or local building inspectors to verify that the remodeler has the appropriate license (if required) and a clean record.

Ask for a copy of the remodeler's insurance certificates to verify that he/she carries insurance that protects you from claims arising from property damage or job site injuries.

When evaluating bids from contractors, make sure that they are based on identical project specifications.

Although it is common practice to make a down payment when you sign a remodeling contract, you should be especially wary of any remodeler who asks for full payment before the job has begun. A payment schedule should be part of your written agreement with the remodeler and may, for example, be tied to completing various stages of the job.

If you sign a contract in your home that is offered through door-to-door solicitation, always remember that the Federal Trade Commission's "Cooling Off" rule gives you the right to cancel the agreement within 72 hours, provided that you have not allowed the contractor to begin work on the project.

Homeowners should be aware that there are industry guidelines that set out minimum performance criteria which responsible remodelers will follow. NAHB's book, Residential Construction Performance Guidelines For Professional Builders and Remodelers, can be purchased by calling (800) 368-5242, ext. 463.

NAHB's "How to Find a Professional Remodeler" brochure takes homeowners through the process of finding and selecting a remodeler. Single copies are available at no cost to homeowners who send a business-size (#10) self-addressed, stamped envelope to: NAHB Remodelers Council, Dept. PT, 12011 5th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005-2800. RIBA is also available to help with your search for a professional remodeler.