

Choosing a Contractor the Informed Way

By Fritz Gunther, NYS Licensed Home Inspector

People who wish to renovate or repair a home are faced with the task of choosing a contractor. Simple enough, right? Not so. As a veteran forensic home inspector with over 20 years of experience, I have been called in as an unbiased expert to settle disputes between homeowners and contractors in a court of law, and I have learned that there is a way to make a good-versus-bad choice. It involves having an in-depth understanding of the overall process that most consumers don't have.

First, it's important to understand the challenges that contractors face when they take on a job. They are hired to come into a home, dismantle parts of it, reassemble it to the customer's wishes, and do it all perfectly, quickly, and at a low cost. This would always happen – if the world was perfect.

The desired outcome for the consumer falls into three categories: quality, cost, and speed.

Quality

Quality is something we all seek whether selecting a doctor, hiring an architect, or choosing a contractor. Quality comes from extensive experience and/or training. A quality contractor has typically been in the business a long time or was apprenticed to a qualified craftsman for an extended period and is now starting out on his or her own. Quality contractors are pleased to provide references and/or a list of past projects for a customer to review. They also will provide licensing (if applicable) and insurance information when requested, showing that they have met minimum requirements of workmanship in order to be insured and licensed.

Cost

The cost of a project is always of concern to consumers. It is also the biggest problem area. While we all like a bargain, low price alone in choosing a contractor may be asking for trouble. Keep in mind that a contractor's "estimate" is just that, an estimate. Contractors are trying to give the best price possible to get the job, but also enough to make a profit. However, a myriad of things can happen on a job that can and will make the project's cost go up. Opening up walls often reveals previously undetected insect or water damage, shoddy work from a previous homeowner/contractor, or plumbing, electrical or asbestos hazards that require upgrading to current Code requirements. Changes or additions made by the customer as work proceeds will also raise the cost.

Low-bid contractors have numerous ways to keep costs low. They can hire unskilled sub-contractors, not carry adequate insurance, not obtain the proper licenses to perform the work, not get the necessary building permits from their municipalities, or even engage in flat-out

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fraud and deception just to get the job. One often-seen and potentially costly practice is for low-bid contractors to simply leave out key elements on a job such as not including the required flashing when replacing a roof, or using substandard materials. Whatever the job, there are always ways to skimp on the work leaving the consumer uninformed, at least for the short term.

Requiring a contractor to obtain proper building permits will likely insure that the municipality's qualified building inspector will appear on the job periodically, obligating the contractor to conform to the minimum standards set forth by the applicable Codes.

Speed

Home repair projects, new additions, or renovations are all loud, dirty, and disruptive, rendering important areas of a home temporarily unusable. All this will cause a great deal of stress, especially if one is living in the home during construction. Every consumer wishes the project to be completed sooner rather than later, in order to reclaim needed living space, regain the use of the repaired item, and finally enjoy the finished project.

Even though the consumer wants all three of these components, history shows that one can have only two of them. A job will rarely, if ever, have all three elements. To understand why this is true, one must look closely at what actually happens with each paired selection:

Choosing Quality-and-Cost

With this selection, choosing a contractor who offers excellent workmanship at a great price will mean a contractor who is booked solid for a long period of time, causing your job to be put off for a while. Or, the quality contractor may work on several projects at the same time getting to your job only a few days a week, thus prolonging your work over a longer period.

In-demand contractors even find it challenging to take the time to simply offer estimates when they are booked solid. Unfortunately, many don't return calls, leaving potential customers frustrated and angry. Some busy quality contractors will show up to give an estimate fully knowing that they do not have the time available to do the new work. This busy contractor may write up an estimate doubling-or-tripling the projected cost. If the homeowner accepts the unusually high estimate, the contractor may temporarily leave his current job to do this new work (putting you now in the Quality-and-Speed choice category.) If the homeowner rejects the high estimate, the contractor loses nothing but the time taken to make the estimate.

Choosing Quality-and-Speed

When an emergency arises, such as a water heater failing or a roof leaking, customer's want quality work done right away. When time is of the essence, price-shopping is not an option. Usually, the first company to respond to your distress call will get the job and their high

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price will, out of necessity, be gladly paid. However, buyer's remorse may set in later when the consumer has time to reflect on choosing too quickly.

Certain preventive measures on the part of the homeowner can minimize exposure to such expensive and stressful situations. Doing things like having your furnace serviced annually, keeping large trees trimmed away from your house, or having a periodic home inspection to uncover unseen potential problems or give advice on what to do next will serve to reduce the stress and cost of dealing with emergency situations.

Choosing Speed-and-Cost

This is the choice combination that homeowners most regret making. Remember that one can get a great price with a quality contractor, but the wait may be long. Or one can choose quality work done quickly, but the price will be high. The homeowner who wants the work done right now and at the lowest possible price will almost always be getting substandard work. Granted, there are times that a homeowner may be lucky, when a quality contractor just had a job that was canceled which gave him an unexpected opening, but this occurrence is rare. More commonly, the contractor that can be available quickly at the cheapest price either just entered the business having little experience, does not have the proper license or insurance, does not obtain the required building permits, or will dispense with certain key elements of the job. If the homeowner is knowledgeable enough to ask about including all these key elements, the estimate will grow accordingly.

Some homeowners think that they can gain the quality that was lost when they chose the low cost and speed option by suing the contractor thereby trying to acquire by force all three elements. These lawsuits, however, are rarely successful because the concept of "quality" is subjective and, if the minimum Code standards of work are met, the verdict will likely favor the contractor.

Since it is virtually impossible to have the perfect three-way combination of high quality at a low cost with the work done quickly, homeowners must choose the two options that are most important to their situation accepting, as well, the results of that choice.

As with most things in life, an informed choice is the best choice.