

2008

SECRETS OF HIRING A GENERAL CONTRACTOR: A CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO FINDING AND WORKING WITH THE RIGHT CONTRACTOR.



EVERYONE HAS HEARD THE HORROR STORIES ABOUT WORKING WITH CONTRACTORS. THE UNFINISHED WORK, THE 4 WEEK JOB THAT TOOK 6 MONTHS TO FINISH, THE MESS THAT WAS LEFT BEHIND, THE PHONE CALLS THAT WERE NEVER RETURNED AND THE LIST GOES ON AND ON. SOME OF THE VERY WORST STORIES HAVE EVEN MADE THE EVENING NEWS.

DESPITE ALL THE HORROR STORIES, FINDING AND WORKING WITH TRUE PROFESSIONALS WHO ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT DOING OUTSTANDING WORK AND FANATICAL ABOUT MAKING SURE THEIR CUSTOMERS ARE NOT JUST SATISFIED, BUT DELIGHTED WITH THEIR WORK IS NOT AS DIFFICULT AS IT MIGHT SEEM. ALL YOU NEED TO DO IS FOLLOW SOME BASIC GUIDELINES.

THE FIRST STEP IS TO IDENTIFY A QUALIFIED CONTRACTOR. HERE ARE THE THINGS THAT YOU NEED TO CHECK TO DETERMINE IF YOU EVEN WANT TO CONTACT THE COMPANY.

ARE THEY LICENSED AND INSURED AND SPECIFICALLY DO THEY HAVE WORKMAN'S COMPENSATION FOR THEIR EMPLOYEES? IF THEY DON'T AND A WORKER IS INJURED ON YOUR PROPERTY, YOU HAVE SUBSTANTIAL LEGAL LIABILITY.

ARE THEY A MEMBER OF THE CONTRACTOR'S PROFESSIONAL TRADE ASSOCIATION CALLED THE BUILDING & TRADE ASSOCIATION? THIS GROUP HAS VERY HIGH STANDARDS FOR ENTRANCE, AND ONLY THE BEST CONTRACTORS ARE ALLOWED TO BECOME MEMBERS. ANOTHER THING TO LOOK FOR IS MEMBERSHIP IN THE BETTER BUSINESS BUREAU. A CONTRACTOR MUST HAVE A PERFECT, OR NEAR PERFECT RECORD OF CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN ORDER TO BECOME A MEMBER. A GOOD CONTRACTOR WILL HAVE MEMBERSHIP IN ONE OR BOTH OF THESE ORGANIZATIONS.

BOTH OF THESE ORGANIZATIONS EXIST TO PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT THE CONTRACTOR TO YOU, THE CLIENT. SO BEFORE YOU CALL A CONTRACTOR, CONTACT EITHER OF THESE ORGANIZATIONS AND ASK FOR A REFERENCE.

DO THEY HAVE AN INFORMATIONAL WEBSITE? WHILE THAT MIGHT SEEM LIKE A MINOR POINT, IT'S IMPORTANT FOR TWO REASONS. FIRST, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND FROM THEIR WEBSITE EXACTLY WHAT THEY SPECIALIZE IN. YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO SEE PICTURES OF THEIR WORK. KEEP IN MIND THAT THE BEST CONTRACTOR TAKE GREAT PRIDE IN THEIR WORK AND WANT YOU TO SEE THEIR ACCOMPLISHMENTS. IT'S ALSO IMPORTANT FOR ANOTHER REASON,

THE BEST CONTRACTORS UNDERSTAND HOW TO USE TECHNOLOGY, NOT ONLY TO PROMOTE THEIR BUSINESSES, BUT THEY ALSO USE SOPHISTICATED SOFTWARE TOOLS TO CREATE ACCURATE ESTIMATES, RENDER AND MODEL DESIGNS AND TRACK AND MONITOR ALL THE ASPECTS OF A JOB.

ONCE YOU HAVE CHECKED THESE THREE THINGS, IT'S TIME TO INVITE A MINIMUM OF THREE CONTRACTORS TO BID ON YOUR REMODELING OR HOME ADDITION PROJECT. ONCE AGAIN, HERE ARE THE KEY THINGS TO LOOK FOR.

WHEN YOU CALLED TO MAKE AN APPOINTMENT, WAS YOUR CALL RETURNED PROMPTLY AND COURTEOUSLY?

WAS THE PERSON WHO CALLED YOU BACK AN OWNER OR PARTNER OF THE FIRM, OR WERE THEY AN ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT? IF AN ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT CALLS YOU TO SCHEDULE AN APPOINTMENT, SOME RED FLAGS SHOULD GO UP.

IS THE FIRM SO BUSY OR SO LARGE THAT AN OWNER OR PARTNER CAN'T EVEN TAKE THE TIME TO TALK TO AN IMPORTANT PROSPECTIVE CLIENT?

IS THE FIRM REALLY A GENERAL CONTRACTOR OR ARE THEY A SUPPLIER OR MARKETING COMPANY?

FOR EXAMPLE, WINDOW AND DOOR MANUFACTURERS, SUN ROOM COMPANIES AND BIG HOME SUPPLY COMPANIES ARE NOT GENERAL CONTRACTORS, BUT THEY EMPLOY LARGE NUMBERS OF SUB-CONTRACTORS TO WORK FOR THEM. IF YOU WANT QUALITY WORK DONE IN YOUR HOME, AVOID THESE COMPANIES LIKE THE PLAGUE! IF AN OWNER OR PARTNER CAN'T BE BOTHERED CALL YOU BACK QUICKLY AND COURTEOUSLY, IT'S PROBABLY BEST TO AVOID GETTING A BID FROM THAT FIRM

ONCE YOU HAVE CONFIRMED THAT YOU ARE TALKING WITH AN OWNER OR PARTNER IN THE FIRM, SCHEDULE AN APPOINTMENT. IF YOU WILL BE MAKING A DECISION AS A COUPLE OR AS A FAMILY, TRY TO SCHEDULE A TIME WHEN YOU ARE ALL AVAILABLE TO MEET (IF POSSIBLE).

FIRST IMPRESSIONS DO MATTER! DID THE OWNER OR PARTNER SHOW UP EXACTLY ON TIME? IF THEY ARE LATE FOR THEIR VERY FIRST MEETING WITH YOU, THAT'S A VERY BAD SIGN. YOUR TIME IS EXTREMELY VALUABLE AND A GOOD CONTRACTOR WILL RESPECT THAT.

DID THEY COME TO YOUR HOUSE DRESSED IN BUSINESS ATTIRE? TRUE PROFESSIONALS ARE NOT ONLY MASTER CRAFTSMEN (WE'RE NOT BEING SEXIST, THE TITLE "MASTER CRAFTSMEN" ALSO APPLIES TO WOMEN) BUT ALSO HIGHLY PROFESSIONAL BUSINESS PEOPLE.

WERE THEY ORGANIZED AND PREPARED FOR THE MEETING WITH YOU? A REAL PROFESSIONAL SHOULD BRING THEIR PORTFOLIO, SO THEY CAN SHOW YOU PICTURES OF SIMILAR WORK THAT THEY HAVE PERFORMED. A VERY GOOD SIGN IS IF THEY BRING THEIR LAPTOP COMPUTER AND SHOW YOU THEIR PORTFOLIO ON THE LAPTOP. THIS TELLS YOU THAT YOU ARE DEALING WITH A TECHNOLOGICALLY SOPHISTICATED CONTRACTOR WHO WILL BE USING SOFTWARE TECHNOLOGY TO GENERATE ESTIMATES AND USING WEB-BASED TOOLS TO FIND STATE OF THE ART MATERIALS AND NOT THE OLD FASHIONED “GUESSING-BASED-ON-THE-LAST JOB-I-DID” TECHNIQUE THAT GETS SO MANY CONTRACTORS INTO TROUBLE AND LEADS TO UNHAPPY CLIENTS.

A GOOD CONTRACTOR WILL SPEND AS MUCH TIME WITH YOU AS YOU WISH. THEY SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS YOU HAVE ABOUT THE PROJECT AND EVEN OFFER SOME ADVICE BASED ON WHAT YOU’VE TOLD THEM YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE. A TRUE PROFESSIONAL WILL WANT TO LEARN AS MUCH AS THEY CAN NOT ONLY ABOUT THE PROJECT, BUT ALSO ABOUT YOU. THEY WILL WANT TO UNDERSTAND WHAT YOUR LIKES AND DISLIKES ARE, WHAT VISUAL EFFECTS YOU ARE TRYING TO ACHIEVE AND WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO YOU PERSONALLY ABOUT THE SPACE THAT WILL BE CREATED BY THE CONTRACTOR.

IN TODAY’S CHALLENGING ECONOMIC TIMES, IT’S USUALLY A GOOD IDEA TO TELL THE CONTRACTOR WHAT YOUR BUDGET RANGE IS. A GOOD CONTRACTOR CAN TELL YOU WHAT CAN BE REPAIRED, PATCHED OR PAINTED BEFORE IT ABSOLUTELY HAS TO BE REPLACED. GOOD CONTRACTORS UNDERSTAND THAT THEY CAN USE LESS EXPENSIVE MATERIALS OR “WORK-AROUNDS” TO GET YOU WHAT YOU NEED AND WHAT YOU CAN AFFORD.

MAKE SURE THEY EXPLAIN TO YOU WHAT THE TRADE-OFFS ARE. THEY SHOULD TELL YOU THAT WHILE THEY CAN FIX OR REPAIR SOMETHING OVER THE SHORT TERM, IT WILL ONLY LAST SO LONG BEFORE IT REALLY WILL HAVE TO BE REPLACED.

AS YOU’RE TALKING, THEY SHOULD BE TAKING NOTES AND IN SOME CASES ENTERING TECHNICAL INFORMATION INTO THEIR LAPTOP FOR LATER ANALYSIS. IN ORDER TO PREPARE AN ACCURATE BID, YOU SHOULD ALLOW SOME TIME FOR THE CONTRACTOR TO CAREFULLY INSPECT THE CURRENT SPACE, TAKE MEASUREMENTS AND DISCUSS WITH YOU OPTIONS FOR MATERIALS, LAYOUT AND DESIGN IDEAS.

HERE’S THE ONE KEY QUESTION THAT YOU SHOULD ASK ALL THREE CONTRACTORS WHO WILL BID ON YOUR PROJECT. ***If we award you***

this contract, tell me exactly what you will do as the first few steps of the project?

THIS IS THE ONE SINGLE QUESTION THAT WILL SEPARATE THE OLD SCHOOL “GUESSERS”, THE INEXPERIENCED, THE UNSCRUPULOUS AND THE INCOMPETENTS FROM THE TRUE PROFESSIONALS.

THE PROFESSIONALS KNOW THAT MATERIAL SELECTION AND ORDERING MATERIALS IS THE LONGEST LEAD TIME TASK ITEM IN ANY REMODELING OR HOME ADDITION PROJECT. THAT’S THE ANSWER YOU WANT TO HEAR. UNFORTUNATELY, MANY CONTRACTORS WILL DIVE RIGHT IN TO THE DEMOLITION PHASE OF A REMODELING JOB OR HOUSE ADDITION AND ONLY WHEN THEY HAVE COMPLETED THAT WORK DO THEY ORDER THE INSPECTIONS AND ORDER MATERIALS. IT’S UNFORTUNATE FOR YOU, THE CLIENT, BECAUSE IF THEY DO IT THAT WAY, THEY HAVE ADDED 4 TO 7 WEEKS OF UNNECESSARY TIME TO YOUR PROJECT. THAT’S BECAUSE IT TAKES 4 TO 7 WEEKS FOR MATERIALS TO ARRIVE FROM THE MANUFACTURERS, EVEN LONGER IF YOU WANT VERY HIGH-END OR SPECIALTY ITEMS FOR YOUR PROJECT. BEAR IN MIND THAT THIS IS NOT ALWAYS AN OVERSIGHT ON THE PART OF THE CONTRACTOR. SOMETIMES IT’S PART OF THEIR BUSINESS MODEL. THAT 4 TO 7 WEEK LAG TIME ALLOWS THEM TO

PULL THEIR WORKERS OFF YOUR PROJECT AND START ANOTHER PROJECT WHILE YOU WAIT HELPLESSLY WITH A DEMOLISHED KITCHEN, BATHROOM OR MISSING WALLS.

A REAL PROFESSIONAL WILL TELL YOU THAT THE FIRST STEPS ARE TO WORK WITH YOU TO DECIDE ON WHAT MATERIALS YOU WANT USED IN THE PROJECT AND TO ORDER THOSE MATERIALS. ONLY WHEN THE MATERIALS SUCH AS CABINETS, FLOORING, FAUCETS, APPLIANCES, SINKS, WINDOWS, LIGHTING OR ANYTHING ELSE THAT WILL BE A MAJOR PART OF THE PROJECT HAVE ARRIVED, SHOULD THE DEMOLITION PHASE START. ONCE THE MATERIALS ARRIVE, THEY CAN BE STORED AT YOUR HOME OR IN THE CONTRACTOR’S WAREHOUSE. A TRUE PROFESSIONAL WILL ALSO KNOW EXACTLY WHEN THE DEMOLITION WILL BE COMPLETED AND WILL ORDER THE REQUIRED INSPECTIONS EXACTLY WHEN THEY ARE NEEDED SO YOUR PROJECT DOESN’T MISS A BEAT.

How to evaluate bids and estimates

THE RULE OF THUMB IS TO ALWAYS THROW AWAY THE LOWEST BID. THE ONLY WAY A CONTRACTOR CAN PROVIDE THE LOWEST BID IS BY TAKING SIGNIFICANT SHORTCUTS. THOSE SHORTCUTS WILL END UP COSTING YOU A LOT OF MONEY DOWN THE ROAD, ASSUMING THEY EVEN UNDERSTAND WHAT’S

INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT. NEVER ACCEPT THE LOWEST BID.

YOU'RE NOW LEFT WITH 2 BIDS AND IT'S LIKELY THAT ONE IS HIGHER, EVEN SUBSTANTIALLY HIGHER, THAN THE OTHER. HOW CAN TWO COMPETENT CONTRACTORS COME UP WITH SUCH DIFFERENT COSTS FOR THE SAME PROJECT? YOU MIGHT THINK THAT ONE CONTRACTOR IS SIMPLY CHARGING A LOT MORE MONEY FOR EXACTLY THE SAME WORK AND IS SIMPLY PADDING HIS OR HER PROFIT MARGIN. WHILE THAT'S CERTAINLY POSSIBLE, IT'S USUALLY NOT THE CASE. LABOR AND MATERIAL COSTS AND PROFIT MARGINS IN THE CONTRACTING BUSINESS ARE GENERALLY ABOUT THE SAME. SO IT'S IMPORTANT TO MAKE SURE YOU'RE COMPARING "APPLES TO APPLES", IN OTHER WORDS, WHAT ARE THE CONTRACTORS PROPOSING THAT IS CAUSING THE PRICE DIFFERENCE?

RATHER THAN JUST ACCEPTING THE LOWER BID, IT'S USUALLY A GOOD IDEA TO FIND OUT WHAT IS CAUSING THE PRICE DIFFERENCE. THE OLD SAYING THAT YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR IS AS TRUE IN THE CONTRACTING BUSINESS AS IT IS IN ANY OTHER BUSINESS.

YOU MAY END UP ACCEPTING THE LOWER OF THE TWO BIDS, BUT IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE **not getting** AS PART OF THE PROJECT.

AT THIS POINT, YOU SHOULD INVITE THE HIGHEST BIDDER BACK FOR A LAST ROUND OF DISCUSSION. EXPLAIN TO THEM THAT THEIR BID WAS HIGHER AND YOU WANT TO UNDERSTAND EXACTLY WHY IT WAS HIGHER. ASK THEM TO WALK YOU THROUGH THE BID AND EXPLAIN WHERE HIGHER COSTS ARE BEING INCURRED AND MOST IMPORTANTLY WHY THEY ARE PROPOSING TO DO CERTAIN TASKS IN A MORE EXPENSIVE FASHION OR PUTTING MORE TIME INTO CERTAIN TASKS. YOU MAY BE SURPRISED TO LEARN THAT THEY ARE PROPOSING TO INCLUDE CERTAIN LEVELS OF QUALITY IN SOME OF THE TASKS THAT WILL ACTUALLY SAVE YOU MONEY IN THE LONG RUN.

HERE'S AN EXAMPLE OF SOMETHING THAT WOULD INCREASE THE OVERALL PROJECT COST, BUT SAVE MONEY IN THE LONG RUN. YOU CAN APPLY TILE OR FLOORING ONTO BARE PLYWOOD OR OTHER TYPES OF BARE WOOD FLOORING. HOWEVER, IF YOU APPLY A WATER-PROOF CEMENT BOARD TO THE WOOD BEFORE GLUING THE TILE, IT WILL PREVENT THE WOOD FROM ABSORBING MOISTURE OVER TIME, WHICH IN TURN WILL CAUSE THE TILE AND THE GROUT TO CRACK AND BUCKLE. IT MAY TAKE 2 OR 3 YEARS BEFORE THE TILE STARTS TO CRACK, BUT WHEN IT DOES (AND IT WILL) YOU WILL BE LOOKING AT A COMPLETE RE-FLOORING JOB. THAT JOB WILL COST FAR MORE THAN THE MONEY YOU SAVED IN THE FIRST PLACE. THERE'S A HUGE

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FINDING CREATIVE ALTERNATIVES AND TAKING SHORTCUTS TO MAKE YOUR PROJECT MORE AFFORDABLE. SHORTCUTS COST YOU A LOT MORE MONEY IN THE LONG RUN.

YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT EACH OF THESE TASKS THAT HAVE INCREASED THE PRICE OF THE BID AND WHAT THE IMPLICATION IS FOR THE FUTURE. USUALLY THE HIGH BIDDER IS PROPOSING THE HIGHEST QUALITY SOLUTION FOR YOU. AGAIN, IN TOUGH ECONOMIC TIMES, GOOD CONTRACTORS CAN PROPOSE ALTERNATIVE IDEAS, WHICH CAN SAVE YOU MONEY, BUT WILL NOT END UP COSTING YOU A FORTUNE IN THE FUTURE. THEY WILL WORK WITH YOU TO FIND CREATIVE ALTERNATIVES TO HELP MAKE THE PROJECT FIT YOUR BUDGET. WHETHER YOU PICK THE HIGHEST BIDDER OR THE LOWER (NOT THE LOWEST) BIDDER, THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR IN YOUR DECISION IS IN THEIR ABILITY TO BE CREATIVE. IN OTHER WORDS, CAN THEY PROPOSE SOLUTIONS THAT WILL MAKE YOUR BUDGET WORK, BUT NOT AT THE EXPENSE OF TAKING SHORT CUTS THAT WILL END UP COSTING YOU MUCH MORE MONEY IN THE FUTURE?

THERE IS ONE LAST, BUT EXTREMELY IMPORTANT FACTOR, TO KEEP IN MIND AS YOU MAKE THIS MAJOR DECISION. HAVING MET WITH BOTH OF THE CONTRACTORS SEVERAL TIMES, WHICH ONE DO YOU FEEL THE MOST COMFORTABLE

WORKING WITH? IT REALLY IS IMPORTANT TO HAVE A LEVEL OF TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN THE PERSON WHO WILL BE WORKING IN YOUR HOME FOR SOME PERIOD OF TIME. DO YOU SENSE A LEVEL OF PASSION IN THEIR COMMITMENT TO DO THE BEST JOB POSSIBLE FOR YOU? DO YOU SENSE THAT THEY ARE GENUINELY INTERESTED IN PROVIDING EXACTLY WHAT YOU WANT? REMEMBER THAT IN ANY MAJOR PROJECT, YOU WILL NEED TO COLLABORATE WITH YOUR CONTRACTOR AND MAKE DECISIONS SO THAT THE PROJECT TURNS OUT EXACTLY THE WAY YOU WANT IT TO. IF YOU DON'T HAVE THE TIME TO DISCUSS CERTAIN DECISIONS, AND MANY BUSY PROFESSIONAL PEOPLE DO NOT, THEN IT'S EVEN MORE IMPORTANT TO TRUST THAT THE CONTRACTOR WILL MAKE THE RIGHT DECISIONS FOR YOU.

PRICE IS ALWAYS A CONSIDERATION, BUT IN MOST HOME IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS, IT MOST CERTAINLY SHOULD NOT BE THE ONLY FACTOR OR EVEN THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR. QUALITY, PROFESSIONALISM, CREATIVITY, ATTENTION TO DETAIL, A GOOD WORKING RELATIONSHIP BASED ON TRUST ARE MORE IMPORTANT FACTORS THAN PRICE ALONE.

IN MOST HOME IMPROVEMENT OR REPAIR PROJECTS, GOING WITH THE LOWEST PRICE (**and not talking to**

the higher bidders to find creative alternatives) IS ALMOST ALWAYS A GUARANTEE FOR YET ANOTHER HORROR STORY.

Green Building Options

ANOTHER ISSUE YOU SHOULD BE AWARE OF IS THAT THE SCIENCE OF BUILDING MATERIALS HAS CHANGED RAPIDLY OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS. YOU NOW HAVE MANY MORE “GREEN” OPTIONS FOR MATERIALS. PARTICULARLY IN THE AREA OF PAINTS, SEALANTS AND ADHESIVES,

THERE ARE NOW MATERIALS IN THIS CATEGORY THAT GIVE OFF FAR LESS TOXIC OR NOXIOUS GASES. SOME GREEN MATERIALS ARE MORE EXPENSIVE THAN TRADITIONAL MATERIALS BUT SOME ARE LESS EXPENSIVE AND MUCH MORE ECO-FRIENDLY. IF GREEN BUILDING IS IMPORTANT TO YOU, ASK YOUR CONTRACTOR WHAT GREEN OPTIONS HE OR SHE CAN RECOMMEND. ONCE AGAIN, TRUE PROFESSIONALS STAY ON TOP OF ALL THE LATEST TECHNOLOGIES AND BUILDING SCIENCES AND SHOULD BE ABLE GIVE YOU MANY GREEN OPTIONS IF THIS IS IMPORTANT TO YOU.

THIS GUIDE IS BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE OWNER AND SENIOR PARTNERS OF BZ CONSTRUCTION, INC. WE HOPE YOU FIND THE INFORMATION IN THIS REPORT HELPFUL. IF YOU HAVE STILL HAVE QUESTIONS OR NEED SOME ADVICE, PLEASE FEEL FREE TO CALL RONEN ZANGI, THE PRESIDENT OF BZ CONSTRUCTION AT 617-943-1951 OR VISIT US ON THE WEB AT WWW.BZCONSTRUCTIONINC.COM OR EMAIL RONEN AT RONEN@BZCONSTRUCTIONINC.COM.

WITH OVER 15 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IN THE HOME IMPROVEMENT INDUSTRY, WE WANT TO HELP PEOPLE MAKE THEIR PROJECTS A COMPLETE SUCCESS. WE KNOW HOW TO COME UP WITH CREATIVE IDEAS TO MEET ALMOST ANY BUDGET – WE DON'T DO SHORT CUTS THAT WILL HURT OUR CLIENTS

IF YOU ARE CONSIDERING REMODELING YOUR KITCHEN, BATHROOM, ATTIC, BASEMENT OR ADDING A ROOM A DECK, OR IF YOU HAVE ANY OTHER GENERAL CONTRACTING NEEDS, PLEASE GIVE US A CALL AND WE'LL GLADLY PROVIDE A DETAILED ESTIMATE FOR YOU. REMEMBER THAT WHEN YOU FIND A GREAT GENERAL CONTRACTOR, YOU'LL WANT TO HAVE THEM BE AVAILABLE FOR ALL YOUR HOME IMPROVEMENTS NEEDS. BZ CONSTRUCTION WOULD BE PROUD TO BE YOUR GENERAL CONTRACTOR FOR THE LIFE OF YOUR HOME!

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