

New York family

Getting It Right

How to Find the Perfect Contractor

By Jean Marie Hackett

The kitchen is driving you crazy, and you've decided it's time to renovate. But how do you team up with a contractor who's trustworthy, talented, timely, and really listens to your needs?

Start with who you know. You don't want to start cold-calling names out of the phone book. "It's always good to get referrals from people who knows someone," says Stephen Fanuka, of Fanuka Custom Cabinets, a Queens-based company that does high-end interior renovations and millwork.

Check References. Even if you get a referral from a friend, it's still critical to get "at least three references for the same type of work or similar work" in "the same general neighborhood," suggests Keith Steier, owner of Knockout Renovation, a full-service contractor based on the Upper East Side that handles all components of renovation. Mayan Metzler, co-owner of MyHome, a full-service remodeling firm, advises taking it one step further. "I would insist on visiting projects" and "actually talking to several references," he says. Bill Paster, of William Paster Inc., a residential contractor who works in connection with architects and designers, also suggests asking for professional references - "architects or designers that the contractor's worked with on other projects."

Don't assume once you have a list of names that your work is done. The most common mistake people make is not calling the references, says Lesa Dresher, Executive Director of the NYC/LI chapter of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI).

Make sure the contractor is licensed and insured. In New York City, the contractor will need a Home Improvement Contractor (HIC) license. To find out if a contractor is licensed, visit the Department of Consumer Affairs website, www.nyc.gov/consumers. (You can check on complaint histories

by calling 311.) In addition, make sure the contractors have adequate insurance - both liability and worker's compensation. Robin Campbell of Barrett Campbell LLC, a general contractor that specializes in high-end gut renovations, says the contractor should "have a minimum of \$1 million;" though some buildings or apartments may require more, so be sure to check before you hire anyone.

Ask how long the contractor has been in business - and for an address. There is no magic number on how long a contractor should have been in business. "Somebody could be in business for 20 years, and go out of business in the middle of a job," says Paster. On the other hand, "someone could be starting out on their first job" and "do it beautifully." Fanuka says all contractors should have a "viable address" and warns against anyone providing a P.O. Box.

Get three bids and compare them. In other words, "Shop it out," says Campbell.

Also, make sure the contractors "are all bidding on the exact same scope of work," says Dresher. Both Metzler and Fanuka say to be wary of low bids. "In this business, you do get what you pay for," cautions Fanuka.

Personality matters. Fanuka suggests looking for someone who cares, is passionate, offers input, is accessible, spends time with you, and arrives on time. If the contractor is "rushing during the estimate phase," says Fanuka, "chances are he's going to rush the job and not do quality work." Meeting the contractor is an especially important consideration. "You're inviting someone into your home, and you're gonna have them around the kids, and the dog, and the cat and the goldfish," says Paster. So it's important to choose someone the family - and neighbors - can feel comfortable with.