

Keys to a Successful Project

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Imagine you have decided to renovate your home over the winter in anticipation of your child's dream wedding in June. You hire the contractor in February and are given assurances that everything will be ready for the exciting event. But four months later, instead of standing under a beautifully landscaped gazebo, the bride and groom are forced to take their wedding photographs with a cement mixer in the background.

This may sound like a nightmare scenario, but such horror stories are commonplace among homeowners who have found themselves on the wrong end of a bad bargain. Unscrupulous or incompetent business people are present in all lines of work, but there are few areas that have as direct an impact on people as in the field of construction.

Fortunately, you can protect yourself from this type of situation. Communication between yourself and the builder is a critical component. By opening the lines of communication with a potential contractor earlier rather than later, you can make a significant difference and help prevent your renovation project from turning into a bad dream.

Knowing What You Want

As any professional painter will tell you, the actual painting takes only a fraction of the overall time involved in a job. Preparation work, including scraping, priming and picking the colors, can easily take twice as much time and effort as the painting itself.

When it comes to renovating their home, however, many owners would prefer to spend as little time planning as possible so that the sound of hammers will fill the air sooner rather than later. This is a common error, and can result in more frustration and work on everyone's part. One way to avoid this is to know exactly what you want to accomplish before you even pick up a phone.

If, for example, you wish to create a retirement home, you should take into account how many more years you plan on living in the house, as well as any physical limitations you know or can expect on the part of those who will be living there. You may also select higher quality building materials, knowing that you will be calling this house "home" for a long time.

In contrast, if you are planning on renovating your home in anticipation of selling it, you might select equally attractive but lower quality materials that are specific for the type of work you are planning on doing.

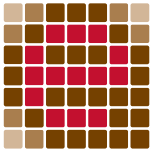
By understanding clearly the scope of the work, you reduce the likelihood of a contractor having to add on or modify your original plan. This can help limit time delays, cost overruns and overall confusion about what needs to be accomplished and when.

Be willing to talk about how much money you want to spend. This will help the contractor to determine whether you have a realistic budget for the scope of your project and the type of finishes that you want.

Deciding Who You Want

In the business world, you would never hire a new employee simply based on who had agreed to work for the least amount of pay. Nor would you hire someone without interviewing them first. Why, then, do so many homeowners hire a contractor based on a bid price? The simple explanation is that most homeowners have not spent the time to screen prospective contractors beforehand.

Most homeowners know that they want to hire an experienced and reputable contractor, but are less certain about how to pick the company that is right for them. Again, planning ahead can make the difference. You should plan on interviewing several potential contractors, explaining the scope of the work as well as your timetable.



Make sure your contractor understands your expectations, such as any plans to use the house during construction. If you do not live in the house, discuss your availability for consultation, as well as that of the contractor. It is also important to know who you should contact with questions, changes or concerns. Check your contractor's business and customer references to help ensure that you have found a good match.

You should also require a written and regularly updated schedule. This schedule should show project milestones, product selections due dates and payment due dates. If you do not live nearby, determine how you will keep track of progress. Many established contractors offer online updates, such as digital photographs or 360 degree panorama views of ongoing projects. This will help provide you with peace of mind, as well as a way to keep on top of the job. Through proper planning, you can create a collaborative atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding, which will help make this important relationship work.

Getting What You Want

If you were painting your bathroom and then painting the exterior of your house, would you use the same paint? Similarly, would you choose the same cabinets and countertops for a house that you plan on selling as for a home that you expect to spend the rest of your life in?

Many full service contractors offer skills beyond hammer and nails. A design build company, for example, can provide you with full design and architectural services, either provided by someone on staff or through an independent architect, as well the actual construction. This can reduce the design-to-build timeframe and ensure that the design meets your budget.

It may also help when it comes to selecting materials. As with any other preparation work, material selection can be time consuming and less satisfying than the actual construction process, but that does not make it any less important. It is a good idea to sit down with your contractor at an early stage in the project to determine which materials are the best for your project. The products you select can hinge on a number of factors. Function and aesthetics are obviously critical, but you should also consider availability. If your project has a tight deadline and a particular type of tile is scarce, you may want to consider alternatives. Although preplanning is an important part of this, flexibility also comes into play. Your contractor may provide you with time and cost estimates based on the expected availability of certain items, only to discover problems later on. If, however, you have already built a communications system into your planning, you will be able to quickly consult about the problem and narrow down a range of potential solutions.

Putting Your Wants First

It's a simple equation, really; building a good home involves building a good relationship.

The construction process can be a challenging experience for everyone involved. Good contractors understand this and will work with you to minimize the level of stress. You, too, can do things to help guarantee a more satisfying process and product.

A good experience can lead to a business relationship that extends far beyond the initial work. Many homeowners have begun a renovation only to discover that they want to expand the scope of the project, or later decide that they are so pleased with the original work that they want to plan on more.

Good contractors are ready to meet these challenges before, during and after a job. A full service company may even offer home watch and maintenance services to protect your investment for the long term. By choosing the right contractor to meet your needs, you can help transform your renovation dream into reality.