



## Tips for finding the right contractor



Bryan Baeumler, host of TV's 'DIY Disaster', says finding the right contractor for your renovation is actually quite simple.

A lot of people who can't hang a picture themselves and that scares me. When I was growing up, pretty much anything short of building an addition was a DIY project for our whole family — and any unfortunate friends or relatives who were within earshot.

My dad had a company (Baeumler Quality Sheet Metal Ltd.) that built parts for and made structural modifications to airplanes, so he was not only handy on the tools, but extremely meticulous — with good reason! That attention to detail was literally drilled and hammered into me over the years as we tackled numerous projects around the house.

We eventually completed the entire interior of the family cottage — after hauling all of the material across a lake and up a 300-metre hill through the forest . . . by hand, of course. No, it wasn't uphill both ways, but I plan to tell my children it was. The projects began small, and slowly became more complex as our skills and ambitions grew. I credit my dad for giving me the hands-on experience — and the advice to always read the instructions — for where I am today.

I also have to credit my mom, who taught me that to be successfully self-employed in any field, you have to know how to run a business and play by the rules. Whether you're a contractor, or a homeowner planning to tackle your own renovation, the same rules apply. You need to have the skills, but you also need to be able to budget, plan, schedule, organize and run your business.

I think everyone should have at least a few basic skills: measure a piece of wood, cut it, use a level and hammer in a nail. Those four simple tasks are the foundations on which cities are built. On the other hand, we can't all be contractors, and that's okay. If you're planning a renovation and you're even slightly concerned about being featured on an episode of Disaster DIY, you're going to need a contractor.

**I get thousands of emails asking me where to find one, and how to determine if he has the "right stuff." The good news is that finding a contractor is simple: There are friends and family for referrals, signs on the street, trucks on the road, paper listings, Internet listings, radio commercials, home shows, home builder associations . . . the list goes on. Hiring a contractor is a bit like choosing a partner and getting married, and a lot like the legal disclaimers at the end of infomercials — it's a very subjective commitment and individual results may vary.**

When I speak to people about hiring a contractor I often ask them to tell me what they're looking for in order of importance. The usual responses start with references, price, experience, and end with licenses, availability and insurance. Those are all important factors, but by no means a complete or properly prioritized list.

References are an important piece of the puzzle, but I promise you will never be supplied with a list of bad ones. When you request references, also ask for a few trade references to talk to. Speaking with previous customers is a good opportunity to ask questions about performance, scheduling and quality of work, but speaking with trade references is also important as you'll most likely be indirectly hiring some of them as well. Make sure everyone's on the same page and telling the same story.

We all work hard for our money, so spending it wisely is definitely important. However, choosing a company to work with based on price alone certainly doesn't guarantee that you'll be happy with the finished product. **Common sense tells us that we generally get what we pay for, and to be wary of the "too good to be true" price.**

Unfortunately, a lot of people can't resist buying a sports car for the price of a compact and disappointment is often in the passenger seat. Operating a legitimate, qualified and properly insured construction company isn't cheap. Even with the disappearance of the Home Renovation Tax Credit and the introduction of the HST, never go for cash deals without a contract. Doing this means you accept full financial responsibility and liability for your home and the safety and well-being of everyone working in and around it.

Provide your potential contractors with a complete scope of work, and compare estimates

carefully to ensure that they're all inclusive of the same materials and labour.

Imagine liquidating all of your assets and putting the cash into a briefcase. I suspect you wouldn't leave that briefcase sitting in your car overnight with the windows down and the doors unlocked. **If you hire a contractor who isn't licensed, doesn't have liability insurance and isn't covered by insurance from the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, you're taking a huge gamble.**

You'll have a tough time explaining a fire or structural failure of your home to your insurance company if you take those kinds of risks.

Proof of liability insurance is required in most municipalities to obtain a business licence. That means any damage caused by a contractor is covered by his or her liability insurance policy. Specialized contractors such as electricians, plumbers and gas fitters require a special licence proving that they've attended school and apprenticed in their field in addition to a municipal business licence. But that's not enough. **If anyone working at your home is not covered by WSIB, you could be responsible for their health and welfare or long-term care costs.** Protect yourself by making sure you get copies of current licences and certificates of both liability and WSIB clearance before allowing anyone to work on your property.

**Make sure all the i's are dotted and the t's crossed before making a decision. Hire someone you trust, and trust them to do the job.**

The bottom line: Use common sense and pay close attention to any red flags. Anything beyond cosmetic work in your home generally requires a permit, and if you are told otherwise, call your local building and planning department to confirm, or say good-bye. **A good contractor will answer most of your questions even before you ask them. Make sure they're experienced in the type of work you're planning. Hire someone you trust, and trust them to do the job.**

At the end of the day, just like choosing a spouse, make sure you hire someone you're comfortable with and communicate well with. Honesty and open lines of communication are paramount when entering into a contract with someone, especially when that contract includes handing over large sums of money and the keys to your home.

If I had the space, I could fill the entire newspaper with thoughts on hiring the right person for the job. Just remember, individual results may vary . . .

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