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Interviewing a Contractor -- What Questions Should You Ask?

Who will you choose to wield the hammer on your particular job? That isn't an easy question. Your choice of a contractor will ultimately determine the success and enjoyment of the job.

You can increase your chances of having a successful project by conducting qualifying interviews, following up on references and credentials, and considering all aspects of the remodeling project-the physical work and the emotional strain. You need to look for the person you feel will provide the best all-around service available-above-and-beyond the necessary construction skills.

The following questions will help you establish a company's qualifications and reputation, and help you find the right firm for your job.

How long have you been in business? Look for a company with an established business history in your community. Surviving in any business in today's competitive marketplace is a difficult task. Most successful contractors are proud of their history in the industry.

Who will be assigned as project supervisor for the job? Also ask whom you should contact if the supervisor is not available. Get exact names and contact phone numbers for all persons who will be involved in the project.

What is the time frame for starting the project? Now is the time to ask questions about work schedules. You should ask: What is your estimate for completion? How early will your crew normally begin work? When will they normally quit for the day? Will I be contacted about delays or changes in the schedule? By whom?

What is your approach to a project of this scope? This will give you an idea of how the contractor works and what to expect during the project. Listen carefully to the answer. This is one of the big indicators of the company's work ethic.

How do you operate? In other words, how is your firm organized? Do you have employees or do you hire subcontractors? If you do have employees, what are their job descriptions? Do you use a project supervisor or lead carpenter to oversee the project? Other firms will have additional positions. You should know what parts of your project will be handled by staff, and which will be contracted out to independent contractors.

Is your company a full service or specialty firm? If you are planning a small project, say replacing the bathroom plumbing, you may be better off hiring a specialty plumbing firm or a bathroom remodeler. However, if your project involves multiple changes, entire rooms or additions, you should consult a full service or design-build firm.

Do you have design services available? If you are considering a large or involved project, you will need design services. If the contractor does not have design-build capabilities, you should consider hiring an architect. Depending on the size and scope of the project, you may need an architect or structural engineer.

Does your company carry workers compensation and liability insurance? Ask for copies of the insurance certificates to verify coverage. In addition, some states require licensing and registration. If your state does have construction licensing laws, ask for your contractor's registration and license, then confirm the license number and expiration date with your local jurisdiction.

May I have a list of references for projects you have completed which are similar to mine? The contractor should be able to supply you with a minimum of three references, including names, telephone numbers and addresses. As a follow up to this question, ask how long ago the project was completed and if the contractor can arrange a visit to

see the finished job. You should also ask for professional references from suppliers or subcontractors to verify sound business practices.

What percentage of your business is repeat or referral business? This will give you a good indication about the company's customer satisfaction. According to research conducted by NARI, most remodeling businesses attribute over 50 percent of their annual volume to customer referrals; some even claim up to 90 percent or more of their total annual sales.

How many projects like mine have you completed in the past 12 months? This will help you determine the contractor's familiarity with your type of project. You should confirm that a good portion of those completed projects were similar to the type of project you are proposing.

Will we need a permit for this project? Most cities and towns require permits for building projects. Failure to obtain the necessary permits or to arrange obligatory inspections can be illegal. In some cases, if a project violates a zoning law or some other regulations, it may even have to be demolished if there is no way to comply with the law. A qualified remodeling contractor will be conscious of the permit process, and ensure that all permits have been obtained before initiating any work.

May I have a list of your suppliers? You may want to add calling the contractor's suppliers to your list of follow up actions. This will help protect you from mechanics liens for nonpayment by the contractor. Suppliers also can be a source to establish credit history for the company.

Of the many questions you can ask during an interview, the most important question is one you must ask yourself: "Do I feel comfortable with and trust the person I am about to hire?" Your answer to that question should make the hiring decision a little easier.

Sincerely,

Ricky Critchfield
President
Critchfield Construction, Inc.