

10 Questions To Ask Every Remodeler **BEFORE** Hiring Them



“Knowing what to ask
at the start assures
your satisfaction
in the end.”

A FREE Consumer Guide

Hiring a remodeler can be quite challenging. Unless they have been referred to you by someone else or you know them personally, you simply have no way to know much about the quality of their work or whether they will be reliable for you or not. When you are remodeling your home you need to have some confidence level that you will not get ripped off. Right?

So, what do you do? Most people usually ask friends, relatives and neighbors. But even then, you need to have another level of assurance that you are making the right decision. The following questions should help give you another level of assurance. These are the questions that I have landed on, after talking with hundreds of remodelers, leading their association and discussing with homeowners their gripes.

Follow this line of questioning with your remodeler and you will soon be able to separate the wheat from the chaff. Their answers will reveal a lot. So ask away and listen closely!

The Questions

1) How long have you been in business?

This is a simple straightforward question to kick things off. A remodeler who has been in business for a long period of time will certainly have confidence in replying. A younger remodeler with less tenure in the industry may be a little quicker to attempt to sidestep the question completely or give vague and nebulous answers. But keep in mind, that someone new in the business might be quite capable and is able to prove himself. The question is do you want to be the project that they prove themselves on? The decision is yours. Everyone will answer this question a little differently. But regardless of how they answer, you will have a gut feeling from the confidence with which they answer. So when you ask, be sure to look for the non-verbal signals. If the question alone makes them nervous, it should make you nervous, and you might want to simply skip the next 10 questions.

2) Who will be assigned as the project supervisor on the job?

You definitely want to know “who” will be on-site supervising the project. The friendly person that signs you up for the project is not always the person on-site that is actually doing the work, or making sure that the work is getting done the way it was promised. It will be important for you to know who will be coming in and out of your home. It’s also important to know what their skill level is, their qualifications and what we might call “bedside manners.” Customer service is critical in the remodeling business. You don’t want someone in your home that doesn’t care about dust or whether your cat gets in the way. They will be in your home! They will be creating dust and the pets may interfere. Who will that person be and how will they handle it? Are you starting to get the picture here? Just try to be clear on who that person is and whether they will be listening to about your concerns throughout the project.



3) Is your company licensed, carry workers compensation and liability insurance?

This one seems like a no-brainer for reliable and trustworthy companies. Unfortunately not all contractors out there are on the up and up. They will be operating without insurance; Especially if you are hiring your brother-in-law or a friend of a friend. Oftentimes homeowners hire friends to do projects and they think that they are saving money. The reality is that those friends typically are not insured and when problems come up and attorneys are involved to resolve disputes, this

will be the first question that comes up. That's why we have insurance. So, if you decide to hire a friend, be advised that if they fall off your roof, it's your problem if they sue you.

The good news is that a reliable contractor who is trustworthy and doing everything right will gladly show you his certificates of insurance. He will be happy to answer this question and prove to you his credentials and coverage. Take note, you will pay more for a contractor who "does things right" and has insurance. That's what you are paying for. You should be willing to pay that extra amount, so that when accidents happen, the person you thought was your friend won't be suing you.

As a side note, Michigan has a law in place that specifically states, that homeowners that use "unlicensed contractors" are pretty much on their own. That is, the state will not come to the homeowner's rescue when an unlicensed contractor rips them off. So, it is important to work with licensed, reliable contractors that have all their legal ducks in a row. Too many homeowners think that they are doing themselves a favor by saving money by using a "buddy" to do the work for half the price of a real contractor. So, buyer beware. Accidents can change friendships fast!

4) What will be your approach to this kind of a project?

This is a good general question that will give you an immediate feel for the contractor's knowledge and skill level. Their description in their approach will give you a great deal of insight in to their background knowledge of your problem/project. Wisdom and experience are great teachers. When you ask this same question of several contractors that are looking over your project, you will begin to hear some of that wisdom, (or lack thereof) when you ask this question. The remodeling contractors with experience will begin to warn you of the pitfalls. They will point out considerations that need to be reviewed for projects of this type. Listen closely and use your own wisdom to judge who knows and who doesn't what they are talking about.

5) How many projects similar to this one have you completed in recent times?

The answer to this question is closely tied to the last question. Their answer will indicate their confidence in tackling your project and whether they have done projects like this in the past. This is important. You are going to want a contractor that knows how to accomplish what you need. You don't want someone who "thinks" they can do it, unless, you are willing to be the pioneer with them and receive arrows in the back on their learning curve. Their experience with similar projects is where they gain that wisdom that I mentioned in the last question. The ideal remodeler would be someone who has done lots of projects exactly like yours and has many years experience in a variety of situations. But, every project is different and each has it's own little quirks. Your goal is to discern who knows and who doesn't so that you can choose the contractor that best suits your needs.

6) May I have a list of references from those projects?

This question will help you quickly determine whether you have been receiving truthful answers up to this point. If your contractor has been telling you about all the projects they've done similar to yours and what a great job they did, then he/she will have no problem sharing names and phone numbers. Ideally, you would like to receive contact information for the contractor's references for projects exactly like yours. If the depth of experience is there, the references will be easy for the remodeler to produce. If they are hesitant to provide any names at all, this should be a major red



flag for you. Trustworthy remodelers are good business people and they know that references are an important piece of the selling process. A good remodeler will quickly produce names and numbers for you, even if they don't quite fit your project. The reason is that the higher the quality work they have done and the greater the volume, the more pleased customers they are going to have on their list. So, don't be afraid to ask and press them for names.

7) May I have a list of referrals from your suppliers?

Now, why would you ask this? Because this will reveal to you whether the contractor pays their bills on time! This will be critical for some remodelers. If they get real nervous when you ask for this, it should be another red flag. Alarm bells should go off in your head if they hesitate, or question why you want this. Good, reliable, sound contractors will not hesitate or flinch when you request this. They may thank that you are being "pretty thorough." And you know what? You are! That's the whole point. Do not let a contractor intimidate you. If they use intimidation tactics to get around answering this one, then you definitely should go onto the next person on the list.

Suppliers typically know exactly who the reliable contractors are and those who are not. I would argue that they are going to be one of the "best" sources of knowledge in helping you make your final decision about choosing a remodeler who will not rip you off. The reason is that suppliers get ripped off from time to time, just like the homeowners. When remodelers rip off suppliers, then the supplier shuts off the credit extended to the remodeler. This forces the remodeler to find another supplier. So, suppliers will know the best contractors that are in it for the long run.

8) How much of your business is repeat vs. referral?

The answer to this question will give you an indication of how many happy customers a contractor has. The more that return, it is an indication of the value and quality of their work. Keep in mind, though, that people do remodel their homes every year. So, it may be several years before a customer returns. And, every good remodeler must have a balance between referrals and repeat business. But, you can be confident that any remodeler that gets lots of referrals from his current customers must be doing something right. This is the equivalent of getting lots of "likes" on FaceBook. We all know that people do not recommend people that they don't like. So a contractor with a high number of referrals is probably a sure-bet, when balanced against their answers to all of the other questions.

9) Are you a member of any trade associations?

Because I headed up a trade association, I can say with confidence that this is great question!

Here's why. The vast majority of the time, only the contractors that are the best will be the ones who join. Those who are not licensed, that cut corners, have no insurance coverages, aren't doing well and struggling to survive will not join. Those who do join are those who want to see their



industry thrive. They want to see everyone licensed. The members of the association are those who want to keep raising the bar in their profession. In, they want to see more training for everyone in the industry. Although, they may not want more regulation (who does?) they welcome it if it means that it will better the professionalism in their industry. Bottom line: you can be sure that if your remodeling contractor is a member of a trade association that they are a cut above the others.

10) Are you or any of your employees “certified” in remodeling?

The answer to this question is like a final cut of contractors from those in the last question. Of the contractors who join the association just to “say” they are members, there will be another “cut above” who take the time to invest in more training. These are the folks that want to learn more, be more and do more. The contractors that invest in more training for themselves and their employees are willing to learn, regardless of how long they’ve been in it. They are the ones who take their profession seriously and want to see others do the same. Remodeling contracting is easy to get into. Anyone can swing a hammer. And, that’s OK. However, once in, a learning process needs to begin that separates the good from the bad. Those contractors that obtain the certifications are the ones who are very serious about their work. The remodelers who have obtained the certifications will be proud to tell you of their accomplishments. You can be sure that the accomplishment is meaningful to you as well as them.

Summary

I hope that these questions have helped you along the way toward your hiring a remodel contractor. Keep in mind that sometimes it’s not so much the answer you do get that you must listen for.

Use your instincts and be sure to listen for what is not said as well.

Shopping for a remodeling contractor is no different than shopping for other services. You must ask a lot of questions—especially the right questions—and listen a lot. It’s important that you know what you want in a contractor and what you want in your project so that the proper expectation gets set for everyone involved.

When people ask me how to choose a contractor, I like to give them my best advice. That is: “there are a lot of good contractors out there who are excellent at what they do. Be sure to choose the right person that you feel you can get along with. The reason is that there will be problems. And, when there are problems you want to be working with someone that you have a comfort level with—someone who will help you work out the problems!”

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