

Choosing the Contractor That's Right for YOU

By Martin Lenich*

There seems to be an infinite number of ways to pick a contractor for your remodeling project. And there are many 'experts' that will tell you how to do it or even who to pick. The following story, written by a homeowner, is interesting because it represents two methods - one that worked well and the other..

We live in a tract style house built in 1986 which was showing its age and suffering from a small, chopped up family room. When we bought the house, we immediately started planning a project which we divided into 3 phases:

Phase I: Relocate washroom, create office, reduce size of Master Bedroom

Phase II: Renovate First Floor (new kitchen, relocate powder room)

Phase III: Renovate Second Floor (update two bathrooms)

Phase I was completed a little over a year ago. We competitively bid self-designed plans for this relatively simple, easy-to-describe project to three contractors. All of the contractors were recommended by friends. The bidding was tight but we selected the middle bid because the contractor was actually a friend of a friend. Needless to say, the project was 'difficult'. The workmanship was below average and the remodeling schedule was a disaster. After nearly doubling the anticipated completion time and many discussions over pricing and change orders, we finally completed the project feeling very relieved that the remodeled area was 'upstairs' where no one but we could see it. We vowed not to repeat that method!

Phase II is nearly completed. It has been a joy working with our current contractor. And my wife and I think the method we used in choosing this contractor is a huge part of our success.

1. We established a 'long list' of contractors consisting of firms we read about in magazines, met at home shows and those affiliated with NARI (National Association of the Remodeling Industry). We sent 10 letters to remodeling firms, soliciting interest based on a rough description of the project (1 page with scope and schedule information) and requesting specific qualifications, their proposed contracts and references.
2. Of the 10 contacted, 5 firms responded with qualifications and references and 4 of the 5 included their proposed 'sample contracts'.
3. We then reviewed the qualifications and contracts and created a 'medium list' of 4 firms and began calling references. In some cases, we visited the reference location and saw the actual workmanship.
4. We then created a short list of 3 firms and sent out a set of scoping plans/specifications and detailed descriptions of the work we intended including what gets tile, what gets carpet, where new doors go, what we want to re-use, what should be new, etc. The key is in saying what you want but not constraining the remodeling expert by telling him how (I am an engineer but I don't know much about home remodeling). The 3 firms were invited to separate 'pre-bid' meetings at our home and were requested to respond with a design/build price including break-downs by major trade (for scope comparison). What we received were estimates with allowances based on scope.

5. After reviewing the bid proposals, we would have been comfortable with any of the 3 firms. Two of the bids were nearly identical right down to the trade breakdowns, the third was higher. We based our final decision on 'gut feeling'...who we would work best with and who would be best for our type of project.

6. We chose RLV because the owner, Richard Vaugier, had the architectural design expertise we were looking for and he was the best 'listener'. He established an excellent working relationship during the pre-bid activities (responsive, thorough, good questions, good recommendations). Interestingly, the runner-up, when he learned who we had selected, sent us a letter congratulating us on making a great choice!

Total time from sending the 10 Request for Qualifications letters to signing the contract...10 weeks.

Now...on to Phase III!

*View the Lenich Remodel in our Projects/Kitchen section

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