

Sometimes We Learn More from Other's Bad Circumstances

Here is some friendly consumer advice when considering hiring a home improvement contractor. These postings were from the Star Tribune article: *State official is the bane of bad builders* and other consumers beware blogs.

Licensing is only one tool....

for the hiring homeowner to use. Unfortunately most homeowners don't have a good knowledge of contractors, and may put too much faith in a license. It's frustrating - I once hired a personal acquaintance who was licensed to do some work for me - the work was beautifully done, but took forever and his suppliers were not getting paid. I ended up paying the suppliers directly and finally got the work finished after constant badgering. Best advice I can offer is to know your proposed contractor before hiring by talking to as many of their recent customers as you can and going to look at recent jobs they have completed. Then cross your fingers. A good contractor will have many references to provide and may cost a bit more, but it will be worth it.

If the subs are uninsured,

the general contractor is responsible. The subs are supposed to be their own private sector business but in many cases they are fly by night individuals who can't get any other work for themselves, lost their jobs in some other industry and someone they know does construction so they thought "why not me", or their only qualification is they are human and are healthy enough to use tools. Some may be well meaning, but often they learn how to do things on your job and at your expense. The homeowner's project becomes the training ground for construction workers.

Ensure contractor know what they are doing.

If you are trying to save some money, remember it is always the most expensive when you have to have a job done twice! I learned this lesson the hard way. Hire a licensed contractor from church who did work for the pastor. He was a nice guy, but he was in way over his head when it came to installing my roof. I had to hire another contractor to completely re-do what he did wrong. In life, you tend to get what you pay for. If something is far cheaper than the others, there is often a reason.

Beware of the bait and switch act.

A big, well known exterior company in the Twin Cities offers a nice low, active price which really helps swayed our decision to hire them. Well, in the fine print (which many of us don't care to read) were "hidden charges" for things that we thought were in the one final price. The final bill was higher than the rest of the bids we received. Unfortunately, we signed an agreement and by law you are obligated to its terms.

How to weed out the bad apples.

1. Call or do a “license lookup” online with the MN Department of Labor & Industry. Google: license lookup Minnesota and you will find the link. Make sure the contractor has no enforcement actions taken against them.
2. Check with BBB to see if there’s been any compliant history with the contractor.
3. Ask for references!! This is your best source. Ask for references from the past three jobs to verify recent job performance and ask for three references 5-years ago. A good contractor will be happy to supply 25 plus references to verify their good standing. Seek out good character and follow through!
4. If you are spending \$25K plus, visit or view their past work.
5. If you have a big dollar project, don’t be afraid to ask for a credit reference letter from their material vendors. Bad credit is usually a red flag of other mismanagement.
6. Ask the contractor to send you “certificate of insurance” from their insurance agent.
7. Ask: What makes you qualified to handle my project?

Contractors

As an ex contractor I was always amazed at the lack of experience and lack of knowledge of a lot of my fellow licensed contractors. Part of the problem was that the test isn't a very effective means of qualifying people to become contractors. When I took the test it was a 2 part test. The open book part was all the stuff I felt a good experienced carpenter should have known of the top of his head. The closed book part dealt with tax laws, administrative all stuff most people have no clue about unless you're an accountant or a lawyer. The other problem was you shouldn't be able to even take the test unless you have spent some years building and remodeling in the building trades. The one thing I tell people looking for a contractor is ask for not only references but ask to see their work. It blows me away that you have to have a good credit score to rent or buy a house but nothing is in place to reassure that a certain contractor has not paid his bills or finished his contractual obligations?