

**Ask Jon Eakes**

# **The Business of Renovation -- Part 3 -- Seeking out the Contractor.**

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Unless you have a great personal reference to a contractor, you will probably have to use the Yellow Pages, or an association list and start calling. Here are the kinds of questions to ask during that first contact on the phone. The objective here is to narrow the field to two or three contractors that you will invite over to your house to discuss the project thoroughly and request competing bids from each of them.

If you would like to read the other two parts of this series, Part #1 - The Industry and Part #2 - the Contract

You can get details on all of this in a booklet called "Projects Done Right" put out by the Canadian Home Builder's Association which you can locate at [www.HiringAContractor.com](http://www.HiringAContractor.com).

**HISTORY:** What is the history of this renovation company? How many years have they been in business? How did they get started? You are looking for stability and reputation.

**SPECIALTY:** What services do they specialise in? Let them tell you. If you ask if they specialise in what you are looking for, most all of them will say yes. You want people to work on your job that have done this same kind of work before.

**EXPERIENCE:** Has this company done work that is similar to yours? This is just another tack on the first two questions. You will begin to see if they are consistent in their answers.

**REFERENCES:** Ask them if they will supply references for similar work to yours. They probably won't give the actual references until after a first meeting, but you need to see if they hedge on this one now. Do call the references, most people don't and some contractors have been known to give false references or even references of real clients who hate them -- they count on you not calling. If you found a really good contractor, you would be happy to talk with their next customer to set them at ease.

**PROTECTION:** Do they carry liability insurance & worker's compensation. Will they provide proof of this at your first meeting? If they don't have it, you are "liable" for a lot more risk that you might imagine.

**GUARANTEE:** Will they provide you with a written warranty for both products installed and the workmanship?

**CONTINUITY:** Will the same worker(s) who start your job, finish your job? The best assurance of this one comes from checking those references.

**INTEGRITY:** Are they willing to quote a price over the phone? A price over the phone is not a good sign, although a ballpark range could be legitimate. If they haven't looked at your house, seen the level of quality you have in the rest of the house, spotted unique difficulties, discussed alternatives with you, how can they possibly give you a good price. Either they will shoot way high to give them room to move, or they will stick to their price and cut in the quality to meet your dollar expectations. Only knowing both you and the job can a contractor price what you really want done.

**DEEPEN YOUR UNDERSTANDING:** You can actually learn a lot by comparing two or three contractors. If you don't really understand their differences simply sit down with each of them and ask them to explain their recommendations compared to the recommendations of another contractors. You don't need to name them to each other -- but share the plan of the other. They may both be good, just different approaches -- or this comparison may reveal that one of them missed something. In either case you learn a great deal about your house, and they have to play a sharper game.

**THE BOTTOM LINE PRICE:** The final price is of course important, but look beyond that before making your final decision. A poor job always ends up costing more than the price on the contract; either in constant call-backs, or having to contract subsequent work to really complete the job.

## ASKING THE REALLY HARD QUESTIONS

Paul Grizenko is a Montreal roofer and roofing consultant whom, I have discovered, follows the same principles that I do in insisting on looking at any problem as part of a whole system. I really want to share and support his comments made on one problem we worked on together.

You may want to do a segment on the consumer's lack of understanding that having a contractor's license is not necessarily a sign of competence. Mrs. X and her husband put too much credence in the fact that the contractors were licensed which meant (to them) that they were competent. As I pointed out to her, if someone wants to sell her a solution, she should be asking each contractor the following:

1. What is the source problem?
2. How do you know that this is a problem?
3. How do you know that other possibilities for explaining the symptoms aren't applicable?
4. How is the solution going to address the problem?
5. What are the possible unintended consequences of the solution?
6. Who else has had this problem, and had your solution applied?
7. What are the guarantees if the solution doesn't fix the problem?

That is called looking for a contractor who is not only competent but who understands the house as a system and takes responsibility for his actions. If fixing one problem only creates another, you are not getting ahead.

Jon

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### **Keywords:**

History, Quality, Contractors, Renovation, Hiring, Warranty, House

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