

Remodeling Spoken Here (everything you ever wanted to know about selecting a Remodeler, but were afraid to ask)

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Buy a new home, or remodel this one? Add a new bedroom and bath, or move? These questions can be overwhelming. Settling the thought on remodeling one's residence is often a difficult process in itself; once the decision is made to remodel, things begin to really get challenging. The truth is, though, that one doesn't realize the full value of selecting the right Remodeler until it is too long into the process.

Just as there are good lawyers, doctors, sales persons, plumbers, electricians (and any other profession), there are those who don't belong in the profession they have chosen. While some Remodelers (and doctors for that matter) are indeed experts in their craft, others have no business inflicting themselves on the populace. Don't be misled by that statement, though. Most Remodelers got into business based on the technical aspects of their trade. It would be difficult to challenge any Remodeler with the technical aspects of remodeling. That is, framing and drywall, window installation, electrical, roofing, etc. The separation of "acceptable versus professional" occurs with the business aspects of the business. The Processes a professional uses are easily identified.

It's a matter of informed choice, therefore, in selecting the right Remodeler for your project. Remember, for most people, their home is the single biggest investment they will ever have. Having a firm grasp of what to consider in choosing a Remodeler is key to the success of your project.

It's Dollars for Expertise

Your money is being exchanged for expertise, the same as going to a doctor for an illness. The more serious the illness, the more a second opinion is considered to be wise. Especially if you will pay for that opinion. Your exchange of funds for professionalism isn't limited to the end result of the project, but the process as well. . A word to the wise; don't rush out and have plans designed immediately. Things have a tendency to change, as one thing leads to another. Securing a feasibility study from a quality Remodeler may be an investment in both time and money, but well spent. It may save thousands of dollars in architectural fees should you learn that it is more wise to move rather than expand or remodel your present home. A feasibility study will help identify that and much more. A feasibility study is a sound model from which to obtain a range of costs for the project as well. Before you jump too far ahead, however, it is wise to find out how feasible your ideas might be.

But it's only a fourth bedroom. Why so much?

At first blush, a project may not sound like much. If the roof lines change, materials used originally are no longer available, the HVAC must be updated, plumbing for the new bath must be installed, electrical service needs updating and associated issues stack up, the price may be more than you originally thought. A clear and informed look at the true scope of work can be an eye opener. Remember, a good project at conclusion should look like it was built that way originally. Not all Remodelers are capable of doing that.

One wouldn't seek out the "least expensive" surgeon; why should operating on your home be any different? And simply taking the first physician's word isn't the wisest way to approach an illness either. Do some homework. Review the marketplace. What Remodelers are visible in your local area? Do you know anyone currently remodeling their home? What is their opinion of the choice they made? Nearly any Remodeler can complete the scope of work; it is the process that can vary greatly from business to business. Identify Remodelers that utilize a professional approach to the business.

Homeowners will want to consider the professionalism of the Remodeler. What policies and procedures are used in the operation of their business? What systems of management does the Remodeler use to impact the project? How is the estimate arrived at? Is there a check and balance system evident? How is the system of communication between the project manager and the customer occurring once the project has begun? There should be policies in place addressing safety of the project site, the flow of the project and the on-time delivery of the completed project as agreed.

How does the Remodeler stack up against the competition with regard to the Better Business Bureau? Are there unresolved complaints? Who are their suppliers? Check to see if they pay their bills on time. Contact the local building department of the municipality to check references and determine if the Remodeler is current on the latest codes. Do they belong to their local Home Builders Association? How long has the company been in business? What is the background of the person in charge? Can they truly deliver what they are selling? Ask pertinent questions. You are going to trade a large amount of money for what you hope to be a successful project; you deserve to have your questions answered to your satisfaction.

Just as most doctors now specialize in their field, most Remodelers do some things better than others. Some Remodelers specialize in kitchens and baths, while those projects may be "too small" for other Remodelers. Some specialize in whole-house or large additions as opposed to merely interior re-facing, or adding a garage. Interviewing Remodelers is just as valuable for the consumer as it is for the intended Remodeler. Delve into the inner workings of the Remodelers' business operations. Ask tough questions. You will receive a wide array of responses.

Know What You're Buying

In today's fast paced living environment, people are not willing to pay for a sub-standard level of quality and professionalism, nor are they willing to spend all their free time keeping the remodeling project on schedule. Exchanging savings or loan proceeds for less than acceptable, near perfect workmanship is not acceptable either. Cutting corners to "make the pre-planned profit" oftentimes occurs when an inexperienced, or un-professional Remodeler attempts to "fix" their mistakes internally at the expense of the client and the quality of the project. Consumers are not willing to put up with inefficiencies or micro-manage their project just to keep the trades honest. Seek a professional with a long track record of successful projects with a good supply of references. Chances of a smooth running, well managed remodeling project increase with the level of research performed up front.

Many a consumer is willing to attest that the "cheapest" Remodeler often cost them more than the most expensive proposal, simply through "items not covered in the scope of work." The Remodelers process should be fully inclusive, keeping change orders to just that. The consumer shouldn't have to pay extra to have something included in the original project just because there were no clear construction specifications in the scope of work. Most quality Remodelers utilize a process of taking the consumer from initial contact to contract. Have a qualified Remodeler perform a feasibility study to determine the scope of work you wish to have done. The value of such a study helps with the thought process, identifies alternatives, and analyzes the prospective project; this process should take a bit of time. Beware the Remodeler that quotes a price without a full and complete examination of the scope of the project. Chances are you will pay additional "change order" money to get what you originally wanted. If a Remodeler is in that much of a hurry to sign you to a construction agreement without performing a comprehensive feasibility study, what message does that send? Are you their next "victim"?

The days of per square foot estimates are nearly gone

While it is true that some projects can be quoted on a per square foot basis, those are really few and far between. In reality, those days are nearly gone. Cookie-cutter homes or additions might fare well on a per square foot basis, but it is unlikely that a high quality, personalized project can. The more custom or unique the project, the less likely the consumer can (or should) rely on a per square foot estimate. The level of quality imposed on the project is directly reflected in the overall cost of the remodel. Most of the time. Don't simply assume that because you are paying top dollar for your project you will be receiving the highest quality products used in your remodel. Ask your Remodeler what level of quality of goods will be used. A true professional will clearly explain what type of drywall, studs, floor tile, roofing material, etc. will be going into your project. Remember, the word quality is a purely subjective word today, as is service. Those words are utilized in every industry from building and remodeling to fast food and car wash establishments, and their respective

meanings vary just as much. The professional Remodeler will provide a clear explanation of their level of quality and service.

What Should One Look For in a Remodeler

How much expertise is enough? Just remember, most businesses fail within the first ten years. Studies show that most Remodelers fail within the first five years in the business. Look for a long tenure in the industry, and your chances of finding a professional company improve. But time in the industry alone is not enough to make a qualified decision.

Credentials are as important in the Remodeling industry as they are in the medical field. Ask for a list of the associations and community activities the Remodeler is involved with. Accreditation from the National Association of Home Builders education programs provides a higher bench mark for Remodelers. Simply because one joins an association doesn't mean a thing, however. Remember the difference in Doctors? Special distinction is important here. A Certified Graduate Remodeler is one that has taken additional education requirements to be at the top of his/her field. Additional training on an annual basis is necessary to maintain that distinction. Look for a Remodeler that takes the extra time to stay current on building codes, management training and consumer trends through formal education.

Remember, the architect converts thoughts and ideas to a paper version of your dream home. It is the contractor that must make dreams reality. As mentioned earlier, the feasibility study will reveal the "hidden" issues relative to the project, identify new ideas or challenges, clearly and completely solidify the homeowner's ideas, and enable an architect to put on paper what has been decided. Further discussion with the builder/remodeler during the Design Analysis stage will complete the "planning stages" of the process. Building the home on paper with the architect, then again with the builder through the design analysis (specification) process will take time, but it is time well spent. Again I caution; good things happen in time.

Will the Internet Help?

The Internet holds a wealth of information on every topic. Delving into building and remodeling on the internet is a great idea. There are web services such as www.thisoldhouse.com and www.servicemagic.com as well as others can assist the consumer with ideas and selections, to even identifying a remodeler. Remember though, that these services are there to promote a business, just like magazine or news ads, television and radio, etc. Those businesses promoted may have paid a fee to be included in the "preferred remodeler" listing. The decisions may come a bit easier, but at what price? Doing some additional research may validate the claims, but without further scrutiny, you are betting on your level of research. Be a wise consumer and check several sources of information and credibility beyond the Internet.

Reviewing the web site of the National Association of Home Builders (www.nahb.com) will provide some insight into the industry. Although there is no list of "preferred builders/remodelers, there is enough information to assist even the novice homeowner. Local chapters of the NAHB can be found on their site. Knowledge is power. Gain insight and a working knowledge before making that critical decision on which builder/remodeler to choose.

Your valuable time and money are just that. Your satisfaction with your remodeling project is leveraged against them. The wise consumer looks for a professional approach to the building and remodeling business, and a builder/remodeler that utilizes a verifiable method. Your decision to remodel, and your selection of a builder/remodeler should be an educated one.