

From decorators to contractors, how to decide

By Debra Lee Baldwin
Copley News Service

It's handy to be handy.

But what if you have neither the time nor the inclination to take on home improvement and repair projects?

Call in the experts. No matter what ails your abode, there is someone who can improve or fix it. And here's a bonus: big projects, such as room additions or remodeled kitchens, add significantly to the value of your residence.

Even small projects, such as painting, carpeting and wallpapering, pay daily dividends in terms of the pride and pleasure you have in your home.

Don't be hasty. Take time to choose the home improvement professionals you'll be working with. Look for those who enjoy detail, work and consider themselves craftsmen.

To make sure a contractor is reliable and responsible, check credentials and licenses and find out how long he or she has been in business.

Ask for references; call or visit a few past clients. Check for complaints with your local consumer affairs office and local branch of the Better Business Bureau.

Obtain bids from several professionals — but don't assume that the lowest bidder is the best. Put your agreement in writing, and

once the job begins, try to avoid making changes.

Know what you want and how much you're prepared to spend. (If you don't, how will the contractor?)

Read magazine articles and visit your bookstore for books on home remodeling. Start a file of ideas that appeal to you.

Be specific about colors, gathering swatches to show the designer. Visit fabric stores and wall covering showrooms to search for patterns that appeal to you.

Think about your lifestyle and what details are important to you. Jot down your ideas as you go.

BUILDERS AND ARCHITECTS

Once you have decided to build an addition to your home (or you're ready to break ground on a new house) you'll need an architect and builder, or a design/building company. This last group consists of cooperative teams of architects, builders, contractors and possibly subcontractors, cost estimators, construction foremen and coordinators.

If you're planning a certain kind of addition, tour your community to see who has done something similar. Knock on doors. Most people are eager to share their experiences, and you'll soon find out the names of the best contractors in your area.

Be sure the builder you select

will give your job priority and not rush through it on his way to the next one. Make an appointment to see his crew in action. Establish trust, the quickest path to mutual respect.

CARPET INSTALLERS

"Choose a carpeting dealer who will have an installer exactly measure and diagram your house," advises Lou DeGroot, a 40-year veteran of the carpeting industry.

DeGroot says to watch out for carpeting businesses that ask for room measurements and take a guess at the carpeting needed.

"Measuring in advance allows the installer to be absolutely accurate, and you don't end up paying for more carpeting than is actually used."

KITCHEN DESIGNERS

A Certified Kitchen Designer (CKD) or a member of the National Kitchen and Bath Association (NKBA) can help you evaluate your needs and create the kitchen or bathroom that complements your lifestyle.

These professionals keep abreast of what's new and available in materials and equipment and have a wealth of experience to draw on. Many of them can coordinate the entire remodeling process.

You'll view their work and have an opportunity to meet them as

you visit kitchen and bath showrooms in your area.

INTERIOR DESIGNERS

Experienced decorators have an eye for scale, color and room arranging. They are experts at accessorizing, and they know where to buy the best sofas and refrigerators wholesale. They usually have access to furnishings you can't find in retail stores. And they're skilled in dealing with contractors, as well as following up on all the details in the remodeling process.

Hunt for the designer who is right for you by visiting model homes and designer show houses. Ask your favorite antique shop or home furnishings retailer for recommendations — some of the larger ones have decorators on staff.

PAINTERS

The best lead toward finding a good painter is a firsthand recommendation. Talk to a friend or neighbor who has had a similar job done; ask about job quality, cost, reliability, cleanliness and attention to detail.

Solicit names from construction and real estate professionals. Ask for references from local architects, builders, carpenters, lumber and building supply dealers and mortgage bankers. Build a list of professionals whom you will later interview and ask for bids.

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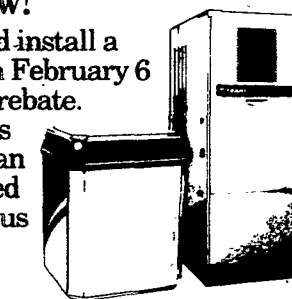
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