

Choosing a quality contractor

The quality of a home or remodeling project will, in large measure, be determined by the skill of the contractor who constructs it. But how do you find a skilled contractor? Before you begin your search, ask yourself some questions: What is my price range? Where do I want to build a home? What are the goals of my home improvement project?

After you have answered these and other important questions about the new home you are seeking or project you are planning, you can address the question of who should work with you to build it.

Start with your HBA...

A good place to start your search for a contractor is right here, with your local home builders association and this website which lists all of the HBA of F-M's builder members. A current list is available under the "Find a Pro" menu item.

Ask around...

The real estate section and building permit notice in the local newspaper is still a good source of information about builders and remodelers who are active in your area, the types of homes and projects they are working on and the prices you can expect to pay.

Ask friends and relatives for recommendations, too. When buying a new home, you are not buying only a structure. Along with the structure comes a package of services, and the quality of those services will have an important effect on your enjoyment of your home. For instance, most homes come with a one-year warranty on workmanship and materials. Since virtually every home is going to need at least minor adjustments and repairs of warranty items during the first year, you should look for a builder who will provide quality service after the sale. And, when you remodel a home, you are basically inviting a business into your personal space: your home. Make sure you "get along" with him or her, because you will be in close quarters!

Check with previous customers...

The best way to learn about the quality of service a contractor offers is to ask previous customers. Find out what the builder or remodeler has recently built in the area near

where you are buying or where you live. Then visit one or two of the previous projects and ask the residents about their experiences with their home and the builder. The best time to visit is usually a Saturday morning when people are out doing yard work or chores.

Don't be shy about approaching people. Knock on some doors if you have to. In most cases, a builder's previous customers will be open with you. Try to talk to at least three or four homeowners in each neighborhood. You should not rely on the views of only one person, because that person may be atypical. When shopping for a new home, do your homework, and you will develop knowledge and a sense of confidence that will help you to make the right decision.

How do I find out if a contractor is licensed?

Ask. When looking for a contractor, check with your local home builder's association or the North Dakota Secretary of State: www.nd.gov/sos/licensing/. In Minnesota, this information can be found online: www.doli.state.mn.us. Ask to see a copy of their contractor's license. By law, all licensed builders must carry a pocket card of their license and have their license displayed in their office. If a builder is insulted by you having asked to see their license they probably don't have one.

What do I do if I have problems with my builder or remodeler?

The typical house contains more than 3,000 different parts, and remodeling projects can be extensive. It would be unrealistic to expect your new home or living area to be perfect. Even the best built homes are likely to need a few corrections. Most problems are corrected routinely by the builder, however, if a non-routine problem should arise, you should follow certain procedures to correct the situation:

- Identify the nature of the problem
- Put it in writing
- Familiarize yourself with warranty coverage
- Go directly to the contractor with complaints; do not go through a third party until you have given your builder a reasonable chance to correct the problem.