

August 2007

Close attention is the key

Keep your remodeling project on track and within budget with these tips:

Do your homework. When asked what they would have done differently, in searching for a top contractor respondents most often said they would have done more research beforehand, chosen their contractor more carefully, or bought different materials.

To avoid those regrets, get at least three bids with three or more references from each, and interview or visit references before signing. Never jump for the cheapest bid. And with any quote, read the contract carefully, especially any fine print. The two big home centers, for example, demand full payment up front unless state laws forbid it.

Keep a lid on costs. Staying within budget seemed to be a common complaint across the board. Both big home centers say they calculate some installation costs to offer preset prices and stick to them unless something happens that's outside their control--for instance, should the contractor discover termite damage, leaking pipes, or dry rot once a wall is opened up. For other installations, such as cabinets, they require an on-site visit before giving a price--with the same provision for unexpected conditions. Nevertheless, only about 45 percent of respondents said contractors from home centers were excellent at keeping costs down vs. about 55 percent for the rest.

Expect surprises. No matter whom you hire, unavoidable surprises can still happen once even top contractors see what's behind or beneath whatever they need to remove. So be sure your contract includes provision for a "change order" clause--an addendum that specifically details what kind of changes require your approval before they can be made. That agreement should state how the extra work would affect overall costs and the finish date.

The National Association of the Remodeling Industry suggests you put 10 percent to 20 percent of total funds into a reserve fund for unanticipated costs--at the very least, for redecorating afterward. And don't create surprise expenses. A top contractor will work with you to settle early on what you want, and stick to it.

Stay involved and available. Many readers felt they weren't kept in the loop about the job's progress. To keep that from happening to you, set a specific time each day to speak with your crew's supervisor. Be sure that you have his cell-phone number and that he has yours. Inspect the day's work every evening. Mention concerns immediately to help keep problems small and resolvable. The longer you wait, the more difficult and expensive the problem can become for even a top contractor to fix.