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Contractors

Contractors: Should you use a home center or an independent?



GETTING IT RIGHT Who does the remodel counts as much as what you buy, and readers often preferred local independents.

Damaged goods, trampled deadlines, and unexpected expenses are some of the remodeling hassles people hope to minimize by using the two big national home center chains to screen and supervise contractors. But our new best contractors survey (available to [subscribers](#))

found that readers who went that route had more problems and weren't as satisfied overall as readers who used others.

Though most readers were highly satisfied with contractors affiliated with the home centers, they gave independent contractors, local stores, and contractors recommended or employed by manufacturers higher scores for overall satisfaction with installation, around 87 out of 100. The home centers (along with one chain's upscale cousin) got scores about 10 points lower.

Roughly 40 percent of readers reported a problem with contractors from one or the other home center chain, compared with less than 30 percent who had problems with contractors they hired themselves or enlisted from manufacturers or local stores. And when things went wrong, home-center contractors were less likely than others to solve problems. A third of those who used contractors found through the home centers and had problems remained unhappy, compared with about 20 percent for others.

Readers told us about more than 13,000 remodeling experiences. Many replaced or expanded their kitchen. Others remodeled or added a bathroom, added or replaced a deck or porch, or replaced siding, roofing, windows, or doors.

The contractors in our survey tended to receive similar scores for all of their projects. Kitchen remodeling often requires knocking down walls or adding or replacing windows, doors, appliances, and cabinetry, and our data reflect readers' overall experiences across design, materials, and installation for all projects.

Here are the details:

Smaller shops stand out. In our look at best contractors, the contractors not affiliated with home centers scored higher in the quality of workmanship and materials, speed of work, communication skills, and ability to keep costs down. Of contractors that readers found themselves, only 3 percent of those contractors damaged cabinets, countertops, or other items during installation or installed items incorrectly; that figure was 6 percent for contractors referred by local independent stores. This was lower than the 10 percent for contractors from one home center and 15 percent from the other. What's more, designers and architects hired by our readers also offered better design help than those from home centers and manufacturer stores.

Company stores stay on schedule. Going directly to the manufacturer can pay off, whether you use an independent store or use contractors the manufacturer specifically recommends as best contractors. Those who did reported relatively few problems with workers as best contractors. Those contractors were also best at sticking to a timetable, perhaps because of their greater familiarity with the products. Their design services rated better than one of the home center's but no better than the other's.

2 biggest home centers are similar. Both stores recommend contractors from a centrally vetted, hired, and controlled pool of installers typically assigned to a specific region. Company inspectors periodically monitor their work, particularly if a customer has complained on a survey or called the 800 number, which bypasses the store. But there's roughly one inspector for every store or two.