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## **Do You Have a Great Kitchen Contractor?**

I've been thinking about remodeling my kitchen—it's been 20 years since the last time we tackled this project! While I'm excited by the prospect of shiny new countertops and drawers that just glide open, I remember how stressful the remodeling process was the last time around. When I mention my hesitation to friends and neighbors who have remodeled much more recently, they assure me that the challenges and temporary inconvenience are well worth it. They all also tell me that having a great kitchen contractor makes the process infinitely less stressful.

When I'm asked what you should look for in a kitchen contractor, I pass along the advice I've gotten from both professionals and homeowners. With their input, I've developed a "great kitchen contractor" checklist. Clip it and use it when you're ready to start your own kitchen remodel.

### **Qualifications & Experience**

All contractors should be licensed, bonded and insured. To find out if a contractor is licensed in California, check with the Contractors State License Board.

While general building experience may be sufficient, many of my friends chose a contractor who specialized in kitchen remodels. Not only were they able to bring ideas from previous projects, their experience helped them anticipate, and avoid, common problems.

For example, one friend's contractor caught a mistake made by the cabinet company that would have kept the flatware drawer from opening fully because the dishwasher handle was in the way. A contractor not experienced with kitchen remodeling may not have anticipated that potentially expensive error.

In addition to having kitchen-specific experience, one of the experts I spoke to recommends that consumers ask a contractor about his or her professional affiliations. He says that membership in organizations such as the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI), the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), and local "builders exchanges" (nonprofit membership associations) keeps the contractor up-to-date on the latest materials, design trends and best practices.

Of course, experience and professional affiliations don't take the place of a strong record of customer satisfaction. One contractor I talked to suggested asking for a reference from a client who had something go wrong on the project—a good way to find out how the contractor resolves problems and handles complaints.

### **Professionalism**

Professionalism covers a lot of areas. At the first meeting, it means promptness and preparedness. Does the contractor bring a portfolio, references, business cards, project planning forms, or other tools and materials?

The bid and proposed contract should arrive within a reasonable time after your meeting, and should clearly define the scope of the work.

"If it's vague," said one contractor I spoke with, "it shows sloppy or incomplete thinking"—a sign of what you can expect once the project starts. The more detailed the contract is, the better it will help both parties avoid the "gray" areas.

Surveyed consumers said it was important to them for their contractor to be able to accurately estimate costs and the start and completion dates for the project. That's not something you can tell just from meeting someone. So ask the references you call if the contractor completed their job on schedule and within budget.

It's important that your contractor "runs his business like a business," says one expert. For bigger operations, that might mean having someone fielding your calls from a central office. For a smaller operation, it may mean the contractor answers the calls himself. Regardless of who answers the phones, calls should be taken immediately, or returned promptly. My friend worked with a contractor who, during the two months of the project, only allowed one of her calls to go into voicemail. And in that case, he returned the message within 30 minutes. Efficient communication "will save you money and headaches in the long-run," explains

one expert, because you'll avoid change orders and mistakes.

Professionalism doesn't begin and end with the contractor. You'll want to see the same professionalism from the crew, since they're the ones you'll spend the most time with. To get an idea of what to expect when work begins at your home, visit a job in progress. You'll get to meet some of the contractor's employees and see how the job site is organized and managed. As someone told me, a great contractor "should respect and value your sanctuary."

### Communication

Good communication isn't only about answering calls promptly. "You want someone who understands what you're saying you want, and can translate that vision into reality," says one expert. He cautions consumers to "watch for listening versus telling in the contractor's communication style." The focus should be on what you want to accomplish.

Ask yourself, "Does this contractor understand my needs? Can he deliver what I want? Get an idea of how similar your and your contractor's tastes are. If you love traditional design, and the contractor has a portfolio full of modern kitchens, you may not be a match.

Ultimately, you should "put a lot of faith in your first impression and the chemical reaction you have to the contractor right off the bat," says one expert.

So how do you find a great kitchen contractor? Start, like I did, by talking to friends and neighbors who have recently remodeled. And check the Diamond Certified website ([www.diamondcertified.org](http://www.diamondcertified.org)) for top-rated contractors in all Bay Area counties. You're sure to find a match.



CLIP AND SAVE

#### A great kitchen contractor:

- Is familiar with the latest materials, building requirements, and design trends.
- Has a clear understanding of your goals and style
- Provides a detailed estimate and contract, listing specific items that are and are not included
- Gives a reasonably accurate start and completion date for the project
- Gives accurate price quotes
- Communicates with you regularly during the job
- Is a problem-solver
- Asks, rather than assumes, how you'd like to handle necessary changes
- Makes sure office staff and workers relay your questions, concerns and instructions
- Has a professional, respectful crew
- Keeps the project area reasonably clean and free of hazards
- Asks you what you would like to do with leftover materials (such as counter granite or tile)
- Provides a detailed final bill and can explain all charges
- Follows up after the job to see if everything is working well
- Gets the job done right the first time

#### References:

Michael Ver Brugge  
Michael Ver Brugge Construction, Inc.  
925-631-1055

Harvey Bondar  
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866-984-9300

David Pak  
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