

CONTRACTOR CHECKLIST

- **Check the contractor's licenses.** My home state of Massachusetts has two licenses which come into play depending on the type of work you are having done - but requirements differ from state to state. Some states require that a contractor only be registered; other states require contractors to pass a test to receive a license. You can check out the status of the requirements in your state [here](#). This is the first step to ensuring you are hiring the right person for the job.

All contractors should carry professional insurance to protect against accidents that may happen on the job. Specifically, according to the FTC, contractors should have:

- personal liability
- worker's compensation
- property damage coverage

And you should ask for proof of coverage in the form of copies of their insurance certificates, so you can make sure they're current, or you could be held liable for any injuries and damages that occur during the project.

- **Google the company name and the contractor's name.** It's time to hit the internet – the great equalizer. These days it's nearly impossible for pros with poor business practices to hide. With review sites like Google, Yelp, Angie's List, Facebook and the Better Business Bureau, it is easy to do a quick check to see what others might be saying. Plus you may stumble upon an old news piece if there are any scandals or court cases lurking in the past.
- **Ask the builder about the estimation process.** Be sure to understand the process for getting a quote and when the builder begins charging you for his time. It is common to get a free ballpark estimate on a job - but it will be just that, an estimate. Make sure you ask why the estimate might differ from the final price if you move forward. No builder can sink countless hours into providing a detailed quote five different ways for every customer who asks - other professionals don't operate that way, we shouldn't expect builders to either.
- **Ask the builder about start dates and timelines.** The first question I always ask is when you can start on my project? It is my experience that most folks make a decision to do something and then want it done right away. Most good builders are booked out several months in advance. If you are thinking about the most convenient time for you to start a job, chances are others are as well. That means if you want to start your kitchen remodel in January after the holidays, its a good idea to get on a contractor's schedule with a signed contract in the late summer or early fall.

Beyond start times, its a good idea to understand the overall timeline for a project. A good builder can let you know how much time it will take to get permits approved, site work done, foundations poured, etc. Its always good to have realistic expectations for how long the entire project will take to avoid hassles down the road.

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- ❑ **Ask to see a copy of the builder's standard contract.** By Massachusetts' law, any home improvement contract over the amount of \$1,000 must be in writing. Check with your state to see what the rules are - but regardless of what is mandatory, you should insist on a written contract. And any pro worth their salt will insist on one as well because a written contract is like a good pre-nup. It protects both of you by spelling out exactly what the contractor has agreed to do for the price you have agreed to pay and will be the document that mediators or lawyers rely on to determine who is in the right should something do wrong. You can see the Massachusetts contract to use as a benchmark [here](#).
- ❑ **Ask the builder about the payment schedule.** Payment schedules can differ between contractors, but in general, it's common to see progress payments due to the contractor at certain points during the project. Massachusetts' law requires that any deposit or down-payment required by the contractor before work begins may not exceed the greater of (a) one-third of the total contract price or (b) the actual cost of any special equipment or custom made material which must be special ordered in advance to meet the completion schedule. This special equipment or material must be listed separately with costs in the contract.
- ❑ **Ask for references and check them.** Ask your contractor for a list of past customers that you can call – and then call them! You should preferably ask for folks who have had work done that is comparable to what you are having done (it doesn't always help to speak with someone who had a basement remodeled if you are putting on a major addition). Of course, no business person worth their salt is going to offer up a negative reference, but you can ask smart questions to get beyond the niceties. Some examples are: How would you characterize your working relationship with the contractor? Were there budget surprises that came up during the construction process and how were they handled? What was the worst thing about the process? If you could change one thing about the project, what would it be?
- ❑ **Spend some time getting to know the contractor.** Seems like a no brainer, I know, but many folks are wowed by fancy presentations or low prices and this basic issue gets overlooked. The reality is when you are undertaking a large project, you are picking a person you will need to feel comfortable having in your house at all hours of the day. Simply said, they (and their team, including all subcontractors – don't forget to ask about them!) will almost become part of the family – and let's face it – the last thing you need is another annoying relative. Spend some time to make sure your personalities mesh before you sign the contract!
- ❑ **Set up workplace rules.** Once you've decided to hire a contractor, be sure to set some house rules for the next several months. Things to agree upon up front: what hours will work take place (i.e. how early can they start and how late can they stay)? Will the builder set up a port-a-potty for workers or is it expected that they will use your facilities? Where will things like tools and paint brushes be cleaned? Are workers allowed to play music on the job? Does everyone know there is no smoking on the jobsite, even outside? What entrances should the workers use? What are the daily clean-up expectations? Getting it out in the open upfront will spare you the irritation later.