

Things to consider when hiring a contractor

Dear Contractors.com,

We're planning a fairly major remodeling project in our house, enlarging a bathroom and adding a bedroom. I've spoken to several contractors. They all are licensed and insured, and I've checked a few references, which all seem to be ok, but I'm having trouble deciding which contractor to hire. What advice can you give?

T.L. & L.L. - Annandale, VA

You may want to check with state and local Attorney General and Consumer Affairs offices to find out if the contractors have any disputes on record. One or two disputes may not mean anything, but a list of several should sound alarm bells. You can also check with The Better Business Bureau, if the contractors are registered members.

"Don't go by price alone!" says Craig Knott, President of Houseworks Unlimited, Inc.

"If the price is low, something will have to be sacrificed."

"Quality and service come with a price tag. When I say quality, I mean workmanship and materials. If contractors/owners don't compensate their staff well, they won't do quality work. If you buy cheap supplies, they typically won't last." Knott is speaking from experience. His company has been around for over 15 years in an industry where most companies last less than five.

Ask contractors for a list of past customers that

you can contact, as well as some trade references. The latter will help in checking their credit standing, along with their professionalism and workmanship. Are they paying their bills?

You can also try to get a referral from someone who has had a project done and is satisfied. Check the contractor's listing on Contractors.com to see their ratings and testimonials from previous clients.

If a contractor you're considering is currently doing a job in your neighborhood, monitor the project to see how long it takes, and take note of whether someone is there every day, and if the job site is safe and clean.

"Most of all, hire someone you feel comfortable with," advises Knott, who is also the current president of the Mid-Maryland chapter of NARI (National Association of the Remodeling Industry) and a one of less than 50 'CR' (Certified Remodeler) designees in the state of Maryland. "Projects like this can take a long time, and you will be around this person - or group of people - every day."

Submit your questions to Stu at AskContractors@Contractors.com. Ask Contractors.com appears every Thursday. For more home improvement tips and advice, tune into The Contractors.com Radio Show,

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Love your carpet — it'll love you back

BY ROSEMARY SADEZ FRIEDMANN
Scripps Howard

You will get more loving years of service out of your carpet if you just show it your care. And the greatest care you can give a carpet is to keep it clean.

Professional cleaning — once every year — is the best treat you could shower on your carpet. In between, there is a lot you can do to maintain love and harmony between you and your floor covering. First of all, vacuum regularly. You can't vacuum too often. When vacuuming, use a beater-bar that will raise the pile as it goes across the floor so the trapped dirt will be vacuumed up.

If something spills ...

Blot it up immediately. Blot is the key work — never rub, scrub or brush because you might be grinding the stain into the rug rather than removing it, and this may even cause damage to the carpet fibers. Blot and clean from the outside of the stain toward the center; this helps prevent spreading. When using a cleaning agent, apply the cleanser to a clean, white cloth rather than directly to the stained area to avoid saturating the carpet.

If the spill or stain is oil-based,

you may need to purchase a dry cleaning solution available at grocery and hardware stores. For non-oil-based spots, mix one teaspoon of non-bleaching dry powder laundry detergent with two cups of water. Wet that clean, white towel with the mixture and go at it gently, but diligently. Remove the soapiness with clear, lukewarm water and absorb the excess moisture with an absorbent white towel.

Press down on the towel, or pile a few books on it, to help it absorb excess moisture that might be deep down. Repeat the rinsing and blotting process until you are sure all the detergent is gone. Finally, place a dry white towel over the area and weigh it down with books or other heavy objects for a couple of hours to finish absorbing the last traces of moisture.

For stubborn stains

Try this: Mix one tablespoon of non-bleaching, non-sudsing household ammonia with one cup of lukewarm water. Go through the rinsing and blotting process as described above. Next, you need to neutralize the ammonia. Mix equal parts of white vinegar and water and apply this solution using the same procedure as above.

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TRANSFORM OUTDATED KID'S ROOM INTO A TEEN TREASURED SPOT



Is your child entering the teen years? If so, it may be time to upgrade and update his or her room. The Home Depot experts have several ideas to do this that are both cost effective and practical. Since the goal is to create a room your teen will enjoy hanging out in, make sure the room reflects his or her personality.

New Look

A fresh coat of paint can transform any room to a teen paradise. As a child, pastel shades made sense, but for the teenage years, a more mature tone may be appropriate. Get your teen involved in the selection of vibrant colors, such as orange, red and blue shades. Other good colors are green and violet. All of these colors come in various shades and add a unique style to any space. If you have a "wild" child, consider incorporating one fun wall, by either painting stripes or sponge painting in a bold color.

Organize

Teens tend to be messy, so the next step is to organize their room so it is functional for their busy lives. First, all toys and clothes your child no longer wants, and if younger brothers and sisters do not have a need for them, put aside to donate. For all else, store items your teen still wants to hold on to in clear storage bins

that can fit under the bed. Label each accordingly. While storing away the past, it may be a good idea to reorganize the closet by adding shelves to accommodate all the hip clothes and shoes.

DecorateShelving can help your teen organize and add personal décor to their new space. Whether adjustable or built-in, shelving can be used for picture frames, CDs and books. For a personal touch, add unfinished wood shelving that your teen can paint or decorate to his or her liking.

Window treatments are another way to match a teen's personal style -- wood and plastic blinds, curtains and the matching bars all have their unique look.

Set the mood

If you have a teen who loves to read or who does homework in the bedroom, proper lighting is essential and can add style. Floor lamps are a good choice along with track lighting, which comes in a variety of shapes and can be easily installed if you pick one of the do-it-yourself kits.

Other small home improvement changes that can go a long way are new light switches to reflect your teen's personality. Updated door handles or knobs on the furniture and closet doors can also modernize the room.

Reflect

Finally, no teen room is complete without a mirror. This teen must-have accessory comes in a variety of sizes and shapes, including the popular full-length model. Wall and door mirrors are great for creating the illusion of added space while taking very little space. For teenage girls, consider a bathroom mirror accented with incandescent vanity globe lighting.