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What to ask your contractor

BY DANNY AND LORI FEIG-SANDOVAL

Of the many remodeling proposals our building and remodeling company prepares, few stand out. But one in particular, I recall well. If you are considering renovation, it may be instructive.

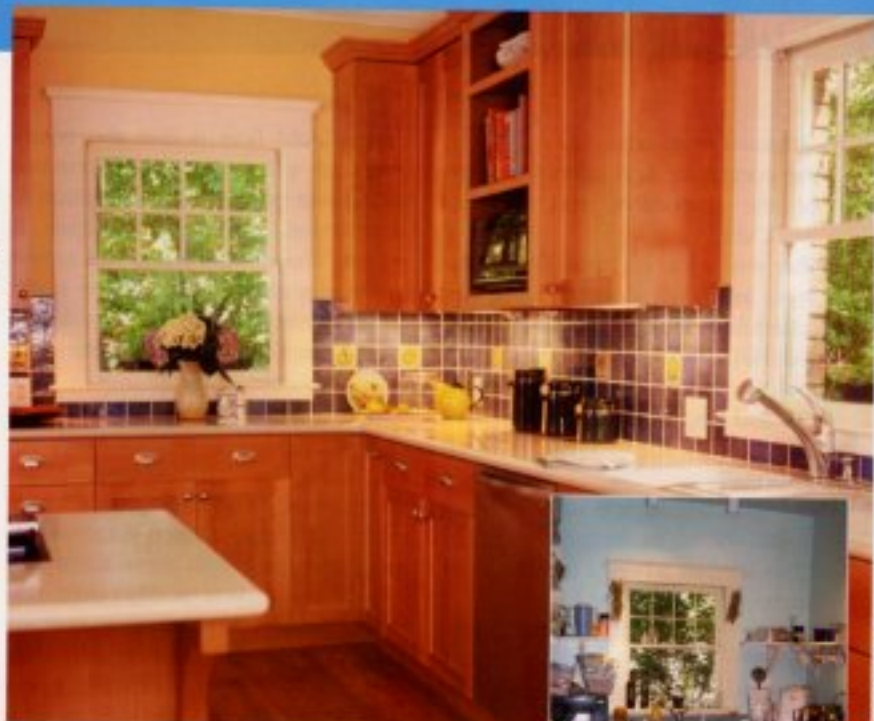
These homeowners wanted to add a master suite, remodel their kitchen, and add a screened porch and deck to their house. After three meetings and some 15 hours of work, I presented them with a budget range for design and construction and told them it would take about six months. They hired another company. Why? That contractor said he'd design and construct the project in three months—and for 20-25 percent less. My shock gave way to curiosity, so I asked the couple to stay in touch.

Their contractor repeatedly failed inspections, and, sure enough, their project took more than a year—costing the client an amount they declined to disclose. That contractor no longer does business in Georgia.

Misleading proposals are common in the home remodeling industry. A careless contractor often gets hired for his cheap price, but costs the client more money, time and headaches in the end than a realistic and careful contractor.

You are choosing someone to take apart and carefully reconstruct your *home*, your place of solace and privacy. The contractor's crews are going to be in your home. Here's one approach: Select your contractor with the care you would take in choosing a child's caregiver. Hire someone you trust, and that you'd want in your kitchen—daily.

Commit at the outset, then, to signing the contractor *whose service*



Completed in April 2004 in Atlanta, this small, dated kitchen, inset, was converted into a larger, more functional kitchen. The new 42-inch wall cabinets take advantage of the existing high ceilings and provide valuable storage space. Open shelves house cookbooks and a microwave, and the individually painted Italian tiles featured in the backsplash are a unique touch.



you value, not just whose cheaper price you like. That low bid is often a red flag. Perhaps the contractor is too inexperienced to have foreseen all the details, and when they discover their error, they may cut corners to make money on the job. This may mean a shoddy or incomplete product that requires correcting—and results in more total expense than the other, higher bids.

Trust customer testimonials; they reflect a firm's reputation for reliability. Integrity is the best predictor of whether you'll be satisfied at the end of the job. Word-of-mouth referrals, Web sites and trade organizations are ways to find contractors.

Ideally, the contractor invites you to his or her office for a second meeting. (Before going, read that company's literature with an eye toward their mission or philosophy. Then see if you can verify stated goals and ideals by the appearance of the office and the attitude of the staff.) At this meeting, the contractor (and designer,

if it is a design/build firm) presents you with a detailed proposal that defines the project scope and budget.

Observe communication style. From the outset, you ought to feel comfortable with how they make suggestions to you, how well they listen, and how they guide you through the pros and cons of different choices. Ask how they document change orders and other communications.

Determine what you'll want done before choosing your contractor. Then carefully compare the three proposals for these details and overall job scope, so you are certain what each contractor proposes to do for the price. Remember, a lower bid often includes less service.

Finally, ask for a reference list of at least eight previous customers so you can ask them:

- How was the working relationship between the contractor/designer and the crews?
- How was communication between

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the contractor and client? Was he or she responsive and easy to work with?

- Was everyone on time for meetings, and did workers arrive as scheduled? If there was a change, did they call to notify?
- Did the workers maintain a clean site and respect the property?
- What was the morale of all involved?
- Did the contractor complete every detail—down to the last doorknob? (This is often where a careless contractor fails the client.)
- Did the proposed and final prices match?

Always have plans drawn for your work. Decide if you'll hire an architect or designer separately from the contractor, or within one firm, and educate yourself about each one's procedures. For instance, will the designer be available throughout the entire process at no additional charge, or will each consultation cost extra?

A practical advantage to hiring a

design/build firm is that the whole intent of what you want is created within one office, from conception to completion, so communication is tighter. The designer also has access to the day-to-day construction costs, so he or she is more likely to design your project within a pre-determined, realistic budget range.

Creative endeavors take time to do well, and collaborative ones can be trying for all involved. Communication, trust and patience are critical. If you've chosen your remodeling company with these three factors in mind, you needn't fret, nor micro-manage. You are now working with a reliable professional who understands your interests and wants you to be pleased enough to give good referrals. So, relax and trust your contractor's judgment and experience. That's why you hired them.

Danny Feig-Sandoval, founder and owner of Small Carpenters at Large in the Atlanta area, has been in the home remodeling business for 30 years.



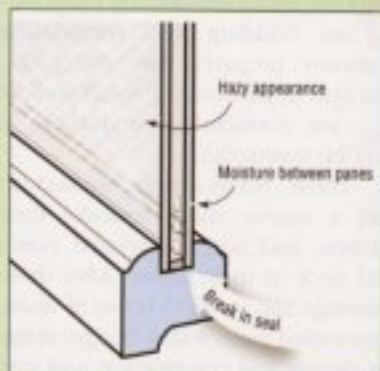
Shown from the back, the goal of this whole-house renovation located in the Druid Hills historic district of Atlanta was to convert the style of this 1950s ranch home, inset, into a Colonial Revival. The



1,700-square-foot second floor was designed to be an informal living area for the family, which includes four new bedrooms, two full baths, a storage area and an open den.

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vary widely, depending on the size of the units and their quality. Estimate between \$2 to \$7 for each square foot of window for materials and installation. The annual energy savings for the mild Southeastern winters should range between \$.40 to \$.70 per square foot of window.



Q. My home's insulated glass windows have "fogged." How can they be corrected?

A. Insulated or double-pane windows have two layers of glass divided by an airtight space. The glass layers are separated by a channel filled with a desiccant (a material that removes water vapor from the air between the glass layers).

If the seal between the channel and glass is broken, moisture-laden air can seep into the space and cause the "fog" or condensation. The condensation will evaporate as the window warms. However, the water vapor can react with chemicals in the air to form mild acids, which etch the inner surface of the glass and leave a permanent hazy appearance.

If an insulated glass window fogs, then the seal is broken and the glass unit must be replaced. It is not possible to drill holes to allow the moisture to escape. Replacing the glass does not usually require replacing the entire window. ☹

Dennis Creech is executive director of SOUTHFACE—Responsible Solutions for Environmental Living in Atlanta.