

Complete Guide to Choosing the Right Home Remodeling Contractor

Created by

Murray Lampert Design, Build, Remodel



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2878 Camino Del Rio South, Suite 160 San Diego, CA 92108

Phone: 619-285-9222 | Email: gcantor@murraylampert.com

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Introduction

Homeowners who are planning a remodeling project typically take similar steps when searching for a contractor to work with. They ask friends and family for references, use search engines to find local firms, browse profiles and project photos on Houzz, Instagram, and Pinterest, check out customer reviews and testimonials on Yelp, Google, and BBB, and more.

All of these are great when you're in the early stages of searching for a home remodeling contractor to turn your renovation ideas into reality. The issue with all of this information gathering is that **it can be difficult to differentiate between the best remodeling contractor and the best remodeling contractor for your specific project.**

Make no mistake - the distinct between these two is important. Any remodeling contractor worth their salt should have a well-designed website that features high-quality project photos, industry awards and affiliations, client testimonials, and more. They're also likely to have solid reviews, both online and from in-person references (if this is *NOT* the case, you can cross them off your list right away). If nearly ever contractor presents themselves as the best, how do you determine which one to ultimately work with?

In order to figure out which remodeling contractor will be the best for fit for *your* project, there's a bit more leg work involved than just clicking through some photo galleries and reading online reviews. Don't worry, we've made things easy for you by putting together this comprehensive guide to choosing the right home remodeling contractor so you'll know exactly what it takes to identify, vet, and start your project with the ideal contractor.

Your home remodeling project should be a fun, collaborative, stress-free experience and that all starts with the relationship you have with your contractor. We trust this guide will put you on a path to choosing the perfect remodeling contractor for your project, and one you'll be glad to recommend to family and friends.

Sincerely,

The Murray Lampert Design, Build, Remodel Team



Do Your Homework

Any contractor you're considering should meet some minimum professional qualifications, most of which should take very little time to find and confirm. If you haven't already, begin by doing some cursory research online and working your way through the following steps:

Step 1

Use Google and Bing to find out which home remodelers in your area consistently show up in the search engine results, then dig deeper into their Houzz, Yelp, Google+, and BBB profiles. Look for high-quality images, before and after photos, and any industry awards or certifications they may have. Pay close attention to their online reviews, and in particular, how they respond to those reviews. Does the company respond to each and every review that is left for them, both good and bad? If they have any negative reviews, do they handle those promptly and professionally?

From your online research into prominent local home remodeling contractors, their online reviews, client testimonials, quality of portfolio and project images, and any other information you came across, **create an initial list of 3 to 4 contractors** you're interested in learning more about.

Step 2

Confirm that the 3 or 4 contractors you've identified are **fully licensed and insured**. Licensed remodeling contractors have to adhere to strict industry standards and regulations. [The risks of hiring an unlicensed contractor](#) include shoddy work, permitting issues, code violations, and financial liability for injuries or accidents.

Once you have the contractor's license number, you can confirm details such as license status, general business and bonding information, and the companies workers' compensation policy, among others. You can check the license of any contractor in California [here](#).

Step 3

Now that you've confirmed your contractor candidates are properly licensed and insured, it's time to get some references. **Call at least 5 references**, and consider visiting 2 or 3 past or in-progress projects. When reaching out to this list of references, be sure to ask about both the project itself, as well as the client's experience during the process.

You'll want to find out if the project was completed on time and on budget, if there were any unexpected issues or costs, how the job site was maintained during the project, what the sales process was like, and how the overall communication was with company's sales rep, project manager, CEO, and any other staff member they interacted with during their remodeling project.





Vetting Your Finalists

It's possible that by completing the initial vetting process and making sure your contractor candidates meet the basic requirements, you're left with only a single remodeling contractor to work with. That's great! You can still use the following "deep-dive" vetting criteria to make sure you're working with the right professional.

If you still have two or three worthy candidates in the mix, going deeper into some of the following areas can help you make the final decision and match you with the perfect remodeling contract for your project.

Start by scheduling in-person meetings with your top remodeling contractor choices and discuss the following:

Area(s) of Expertise

You should probably have a decent idea of the contractor's speciality based on your initial research, but take this opportunity to ask them directly about their experience with total renovations, kitchen and bath upgrades, second story additions, interior design, etc.

Most contractors will specialize in one or two specific types of remodeling projects, although many firms can take on multiple types of projects as well. Obviously, you'll want to consider how a contractor's specialty matches up with your specific needs, and whether or not they're the best fit for your project.

Company Profile

It pays to delve into the company history of a home remodeling contractor in order to learn more about them personally, how their business operate, and how they are perceived by the local community. Start by asking about how the company got started and how long they've been in business. Typically, a contractor that's been in business for at least 10 years or more is a more reliable choice. However, it isn't always safe to assume that the age of a contractor's license represents how long the company has actually been in business. Sometimes a contractor's license has been purchased from an older company. Ask for proof of incorporation date to verify how long the firm has actually been in business.

In addition to longevity in the industry, a remodeling company's reputation and involvement in their local community can tell you a lot about the type of people that work for the organization, and how they conduct themselves. Do they give to any local charities, support any schools or athletic teams, or participate in any fundraising events? Community involvement is a great indicator of a trustworthy, dependable, and ethical company.

Personality and Culture Fit

Another important factor to consider during your in-person meetings is how well your personality and communication style meshes with that of a potential contractor. We've all been in social situations where the person or people we were speaking with gave off a bad vibe, or otherwise made us feel "off."

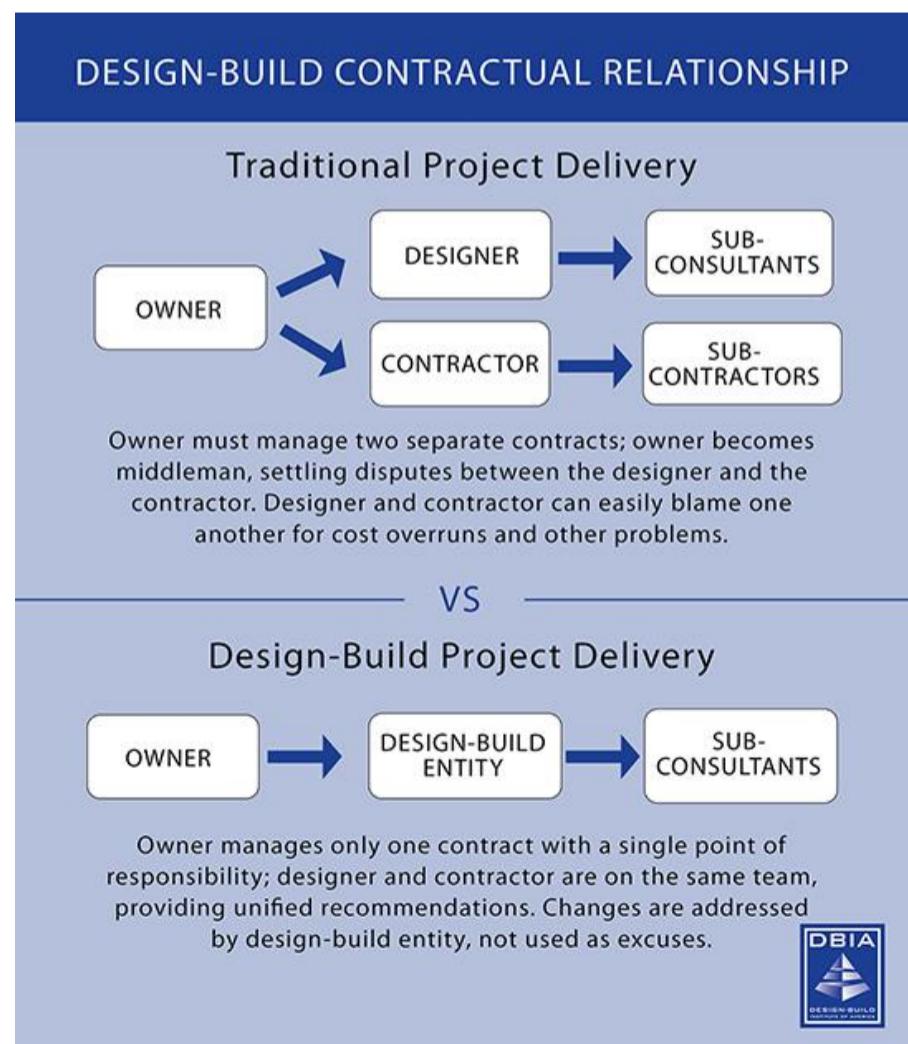
If you feel that way during your in-person meetings and/or other discussions with potential contractors, you should definitely take that into account. These are the people who you'll be communicating and interacting with on a regular basis for the next several weeks, possibly months. It's important that you're comfortable with how your contractor communicates, how open they are with you about project progress, issues, etc., and how well they integrate your feedback into the actual work being done.

Take note of the company's culture as you're doing further vetting. Are they a close, small-knit team or a sprawling corporate entity? Do they lead with past accolades and brag about huge showrooms, or do they focus on cutting overhead, cost efficiency, and delivering great work and even better customer service? Additionally, how involved is the company owner or leadership team in your project? Will you have direct access to the CEO should you need to contact them directly, or is your only point of contact a sales rep or project manager?

Project Delivery Process

How a remodeling contractor chooses to complete a project will have a huge impact on the timeline, budget, communication, and overall client experience during the process. With home remodeling, there are two primary methods of project delivery: [Design-Build](#) and the traditional approach of "design-bid-build."

According to the [Design-Build Institute of America](#), "Design-build is an alternative to the traditional design-bid-build project delivery method. Under the latter approach, design and construction services are split



into separate entities, separate contracts, separate work. Across the country and around the world, design-build successfully delivers both horizontal and vertical construction projects with superior results – no matter what the project type.”

As San Diego's most trusted [design-build contractor](#), we are proponents of the design-build method for a number of reasons:

- It provides customers with a single point of contact through their project, helping to streamline communication, cut down on miscommunication, and relieving them from the burden of having to deal with multiple contractors and vendors.
- Because there's a single contractor leading both the design *and* the build of your project, it's much more likely that cost estimates will be accurate, budgets will be adhered to, and timelines will be met.
- Accountability and consistency are baked into the design-build process. A single point of contact and authority leads to continuity for all sub-contractors and vendors, removes conflicts of interest, and eliminates finger-pointing and excuses.

Understanding Bids, Estimates, and Project Costs

Perhaps the most important question homeowners will be asking themselves during this process is: [How much will my home remodeling project cost?](#) And rightly so, as a major home remodel or renovation project is likely to be one of the largest expenditures for any homeowner (aside from the purchase of their home, of course).

When it comes to project bids and estimates, the old adage, “You get what you pay for” certainly applies - up to a point. Bids that are either extremely low or very high compared to other estimates you've received should be seen as red flags. If you're receiving multiple bids for your project and there are some extreme outliers on both the low and high ends, it's a good rule of thumb to throw out those outlier bids.

Additionally, although cost per square foot is commonly used to estimate construction project costs, this method [doesn't work well for home remodeling projects](#). Differences in types of rooms to be renovated, materials, professional experience, and even location can all play a part in the actual cost of a home remodel. A remodeling contractor who bases cost estimates only on square footage is leaving out critical information that will likely lead to cost increases as the project gets underway.

Be sure to discuss project costs and down payment with potential contractors as well. It's good to know whether or not they add markup to materials, change orders, etc., and if so, how much. In California, it is illegal to ask for or accept a down payment of [more than 10% of the total home improvement contract price, or \\$1,000, whichever is less](#). If a contractor asks for a down payment of more than \$1,000, that's another red flag that they might not be the most reputable company to work with.



Questions to Ask Your Potential Contractor

It's important you ask your potential contractor the right questions in order to figure out if they're a good fit for your project. Below we've created a list of questions to ask when you meet with your potential contractor(s) in person.

- 1. What type of warranty do you offer and what exactly is covered?**
- 2. Who will be my main point of contact during my project, and will I have access to the company owner if necessary?**
- 3. What type of communication can I expect from your team during my project and will there be scheduled progress check-in meetings?**
- 4. How does your team account for and/or handle any unforeseen issues that may come up during a project?**
- 5. Are finishes and fixtures included in the estimated cost?**
- 6. How are change orders handled and priced?**
- 7. Do you add markup on materials, appliances, etc.? If so, what is your standard markup rate?**
- 8. Do you provide a transparent summary of costs and fees for all labor, materials, etc.?**
- 9. What type of payment schedule do you offer?**
- 10. What is your involvement once a project has been completed?**

Below is a printable version of these questions to have on hand as you interview potential remodeling contractors.

Questions to Ask Your Potential Contractor

- What type of warranty do you offer and what exactly is covered?**
- Who will be my main point of contact during the project and will I have access to the company owner if necessary?**
- What type of communication can I expect from your team and will there be scheduled progress check-in meetings?**
- How does your team account for and/or handle unforeseen issues that may come up during a project?**
- Are finishes and fixtures included in the estimated project cost?**
- How are change orders handled and priced?**
- Do you add markup to appliances and finished flooring? If so, what is your standard markup rate?**
- Do you provide a detailed scope of work, including all costs?**
- What type of payment schedule do you offer?**
- What is your involvement once a project has been completed?**





Questions to Ask Yourself

Now that you have all of the information necessary to select the right contractor for your remodeling project, you need to ask yourself some important questions. These mainly deal with how your personality, communication style, core values, and project goals mesh with the contractors you've recently met with.

1

What is more important to me:

Awards and accolades or reputation and experience?

2

Am I willing to pay more for:

Fancy showrooms and "red carpet" treatment, or would I rather work with a no-frills, cost-efficient contractor?

3

Will I prefer working with:

A large corporate remodeling company or a small family organization?

4

Am I comfortable communicating:

Only with junior-level staff and project managers, or is it important that I build rapport with the CEO as well?

5

Is price the most important factor in my project:

If so, am I willing to sacrifice quality and customer service for the lowest price possible?



Red Flags to Watch Out For

We've already touched on a few red flags to look out for, but we wanted to emphasize the following ones, as they tend to come up most often. Beware of any home remodeling contractor who demonstrates the following:

Lack of License or Insurance

This is perhaps the ultimate red flag, and one that **should immediately disqualify any contractor from consideration**. Paying for work from an unpermitted contractor leaves you at risk of fines, legal fees, and without recourse to recoup any lost investment. Not to mention, the quality of the work is likely to be below the industry standard.

Extreme Bids

As we've discussed, receiving either very low or very high bids compared to other contractor estimates is a bad sign. [While low bids might be tempting](#), a contractor offering a bid that is more than 15% below other bids either doesn't completely understand the extent of your project, or they're purposefully low balling the bid as a strategy to lock in the job, only to tack on additional costs once the work gets started.

Large Upfront Cost

By law, contractors in California can only ask for and accept down payments of **\$1,000 maximum**. If a contractor asks you for more money than that upfront, it's almost always a sign of an unscrupulous company looking to take advantage of an unsuspecting homeowner.

Permits? We Don't Need No Stinkin' Permits!

In many cases, yes, you do need permits to complete a home remodeling project. A contractor who feels permits are optional, rather than a requirement, isn't one we'd recommend working with. While you might like the idea of not having to pay for permits,

we're sure you won't like it when your remodeling project is shut down by a city inspector, or if find yourself on the hook for costly repairs or legal fees.

It Doesn't Feel Right

Trust your instincts. If your interactions with a remodeling contractor leave you feeling uneasy or uncomfortable in any way, it's better to pass on working with them than enter into an expensive project that you'll end up regretting.





Final Takeaways

We hope you've found this guide to choosing the right home remodeling contractor helpful. We'll leave you with a few final takeaways to give you that extra bit of knowledge so you can be 100% confident in your choice of home remodeling contractor to turn your dream project into a reality.

“Wholesale Pricing” Isn’t Exclusive

The truth is, most professional contractors and remodeling firms of a certain level have the same wholesale pricing relationships with manufacturers and vendors. A manufacturer's price is the going rate for any contractor with a wholesale buying relationship, so there is rarely a difference in the pricing that one remodeling company can secure with a vendor vs. another. However, there *is* a difference in what a remodeler will add as far as markup to their wholesale prices.

Showrooms + Large Teams = More Overhead

Some remodeling firms attempt to WOW potential clients with large teams and huge showrooms. While this may seem impressive, there is a very real cost to all of that extra overhead which is almost always passed along to the client in the form of fees, markup, and other project costs.

Make It Personal

Regardless of the size and scope of your home remodeling project, the process is a very personal one. You'll be opening your home to a team of strangers and asking them to bring *your* vision to life. Having a personal connection with the people handling your project matters a great deal to the overall experience, and will no doubt have an impact on the final result. Choose the remodeling contractor who you connect with, who communicates well, and who comes ready to serve.