



The 7 Things Homeowners Need To Prioritize When Shopping For Contractors

A reasonable budget, professional accreditation and referrals are just some of the factors that help the process go smoothly.

Katie LaTour
02/06/2019

Enhancing your home's interior can be as daunting as it is exciting, especially when it comes to finding the right contractor to fit your needs. ESTATENVY connected with Catherine Schager of [Catherine Schager Designs](#) and Michael Menn of [Michael Menn Ltd.](#) to learn just what design-hungry homeowners need to know. Leverage Renovation Professionals' Specialties Catherine Schager explained that her entire career has been in interior design, but she's been self-employed for the past nine years. Typically, her design team specializes in kitchen and bath design. Michael Menn has worked as an architect for the previous 42 years and a contractor for the last 30. He shared that this his team primarily renovates common areas, kitchens and the master bathroom in homes. Knowing where a contractor and/or designer spends the majority of their professional focus aids homeowners by allowing them to match renovation professionals to projects best-suited to those skills and experience. Take

Ownership of the Research Process First and foremost, says Schager, clients “need to establish a realistic budget.” This means that homeowners should “know what they’re willing to spend,” and ask questions about just what the cost of materials and labor is expected to be. Schager emphasized the importance of being transparent with potential contractors: “We can help you do what you want, but if you don’t share [exactly] what that is, we can’t help you to the best of our ability.”

Menn added that, in addition to knowing what they want, clients should seek out online services. Channels like [Houzz.com](https://www.houzz.com) have emerged that allow homeowners to save and upload design inspiration photos and get feedback from architects and designers. Find the Project Managers When it comes to contractors, the red flags are fairly straightforward, according to Schager. She recommended keeping an eye out for “somebody who doesn’t return calls or who doesn’t show up on time; who isn’t responsive. My contractors are very responsive to both me and to clients, which is important—as a client, you need answers in a timely fashion and to feel that somebody is managing the process.”

Schager concluded: “It’s really important to have a good feel for these people. I don’t care what the cost is; you spend a lot of time with your contractor.” To make sure contractors are vetted and ready to transform your design dreams into a reality, Schager recommends asking for testimonials and references and noting response time. She also notes that clients should pay attention to whether or not their contractors have “established systems” or practices—“they need a good handle on timeframe,” Schager said, “otherwise the project will be all over the place and take longer than it should.”

Align Your Budget, Your Wishlist and Your Lifestyle

Menn emphasized that it’s important for clients to consider gradations in desired items and materials. “So we’re into semi-professional kitchens, but clients will want professional-grade appliances and materials, and we would have to bring the kitchen up to code...so sometimes a client might not understand budget.” This doesn’t necessarily mean that the vision can’t become a reality: “There are other brands that are more affordable, [offering] different grades of quartz, for example,” Menn explained. Additionally, there are also lifestyle elements to take into consideration. “I sit down [with my clients] and let them know that an investment now means a house will gain in value,” Menn said, adding that the long-term plans of the homeowners factor in as well. “Millennials grew up with open floor plans, so they want to stay in the living area longest. With Baby Boomers, they want to age in place and they want [the design] the way they want it.” “Part of my job is to unscramble those ideas and marry budget with design,” Menn said. Remember That Cost Isn’t Everything “I think the biggest mistake is that people make a contractor selection based on cost only,” explained Schager. “Many times, contractors’ proposals aren’t specific enough or fully fleshed out, so you can’t really compare them. Clients may believe something should cost X amount and then they’ll go with the least expensive contractor, but that doesn’t mean they’ll get the best outcome,” Schager said. “Also, some contractors do the same thing over and over and they aren’t interested in doing anything new or expanding,” she explained. Utilize Networks, Look for Membership and Online Presence Don’t underestimate the power of word of mouth, counseled Menn. “Referral and word of mouth is probably 90 percent of the work we get,” Menn explained. “If you can’t ask

your neighbors, inevitably a cousin or family member has remodeled and gives a name. Names get passed around in social circles and families a lot.” And while it may be tempting to exclusively peruse online reviews when choosing a contractor, Schager warns against this. “Online reviews are great, but they can be misleading. Somebody might like the project [you offer them] but not have the same eye for detail as you.” When asked what to focus on if not reviews, Schager said to consider online presence and testimonials. “As a homeowner, having the opportunity to see a project [the contractor has] done, asking if they have an online presence and talking to homeowners they’ve done projects for” all emerge as best practices, according to Schager. In addition to a referral pool, designers, contractors and architects alike often like to work with a recurring team of design professionals. “There’s a pool of people that we like to work with,” said Schager. “Having a trusted advisor is great. I have a couple designers that I prefer more than others but I base this on what I think the client is looking for and match them up personality- and budget-wise.” Menn emphasizes professional membership. “Hire a professional. In remodeling or redecorating, there are two organizations to belong to: The National Association of Homebuilders and the National Association of Remodeling Industries. Members sign a pledge that they won’t rip clients off,” Menn said. Homeowners can also visit the websites of both associations and search for contractors by ZIP code to make sure candidates have the professional accreditation they should. They can also check with the Better Business Bureau. Menn maintains that resources like Home Advisor and Angie’s List are good jumping-off points so long as homeowners do the research. “Are [the potential contractors] licensed and are they insured? It’s one thing to say you have insurance, but it’s another thing to have it. Most reputable contractors do,” Menn said. Seek Out Contractors Committed to Partnering with You When asked what makes for a good fit between homeowner and contractor, Menn emphasized the importance of partnership. The key is “listening on both sides,” Menn began. “As a contractor, it’s about listening to what my client wants. They’re trying to choose something and I’m trying to uncover what that is.” He encouraged contractors to leverage consultations as well. “I like going to [a client’s] space and seeing what they’re like. I don’t charge for the first visit; I find out what their program is, what they’re hot and cold buttons are...people are very passionate about their home. They will tell you what they want, you just have to know how to ask,” Menn said. Menn makes sure he resolves any concerns and that his and the client’s renovation plans are aligned. “I repeat back to them exactly what they’re looking for. Listening and being able to communicate are huge parts of the process,” Menn explained. Menn also said that he’s happy to partner with designers, including those recommended by the homeowner, but it depends on the project. “It’s a two-way street,” Menn said. Once that’s understood, they “can come together as a team.” He points out that it’s important for clients to remember that designers may be around the property much more frequently and for longer stretches than a contractor. Clients should take care to ensure that their designer is “a good match, personality-wise,” said Menn.