

ASK AN EXPERT

Do your research when looking for a contractor

J. Mark Harrison is executive vice president of the Home Builders Association of Illinois. We asked him how buyers can find reputable contractors to build their homes.

By Leslie Mann

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Q Are general contractors licensed in Illinois?

A No, there are no state licensing laws for general contractors. There are some at the local level, but many of those just require the paying of licensing fees. That doesn't mean the licensed ones are all good and the unlicensed ones are all bad, though. It means the buyer has to do his own research.

Q Where should the buyer start?

A Before comparing contractors, educate yourself about what makes quality construction. Quality does not equate with price. I can show you a quality-built \$150,000 house and a \$500,000 house without quality. If you don't know a lot about construction, I recommend taking a community college course. It will pay off.

Q Then, it's time for the search to begin?

A Most people start with location — who is building in the community you want? Good neighborhoods and good schools are usually the first concern. In this community, ask around to collect names of builders. Ask at the barbershop, the hairdresser's, the country club, cocktail parties and any other local watering hole. The best and the worst [contractor] names get passed around like cheap dates.

Q Then the buyer should interview several builders?

A Yes, meet with them and get to know them. Ask how long they've been in business. If a builder has only been building a year, you have to do more research. Ask who your No. 1 contact will be, the builder himself or a supervisor? Do you have chemistry with that person? If he makes you feel like a dummy

when you ask questions, the relationship is not going to work. If the builder only talks to you, but your spouse is the key decision-maker, this won't work, either.

Ask about his callback policy. There is no perfect house; every house will have problems. But, a good builder responds quickly and takes care of the problems.

Don't just look at his model homes; look at some under construction. Talk to his subs and ask if they get paid on time. Get the name of his banker and ask the banker if the builder is financially secure.

Q How many references should the buyer request?

A If the builder can't give you 10, move on. If you only get one, it might be his brother-in-law. But, chances are he doesn't have 10 brothers-in-law.

The references will be your best sources. They will tell you all about their experiences.

But remember to have realistic expectations. If a sub scratched a floor and the builder fixed it instead of replacing the whole floor, for example, that is realistic. You can't expect the builder to redo the whole floor.

Q What other sources of information should the buyer employ?

A Call trade organizations, but remember that being a member doesn't mean the builder is OK. Not being in any trade group could be a red flag, though. You can call chambers of commerce, but they don't always give information about non-members. You can "Google" the builder, which could reveal a lot. But, finding his name in a lawsuit record doesn't mean he isn't a good builder. Most builders have disputes at some point. Research further.

Readers are encouraged to ask questions about home construction, financing or other matters pertaining to real estate, and to suggest names of experts. Write to Ask an Expert, New Homes section, Chicago Tribune, 435 N. Michigan Ave., 4th floor, Chicago, IL 60611. Or e-mail: newhomes@tribune.com.