



Top 10 things to Ask a Prospective Contractor

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Locating a potential contractor is just the first step, and having them call you back is nearly a miracle. But if you can get past those first few hurdles, you need to check out prospective contractors thoroughly before deciding who to hire.

Even when you get a positive referral from a friend or neighbour, you should still check the references and reputation of any contractor before hiring them.

Interview the Contractor

It is important that you are comfortable with your contractor, that you trust them in your home, and that you have confidence they will complete the project as promised. If you don't feel that way, you probably shouldn't hire them.

The best way to determine your comfort level is with a thorough interview. In addition to whether they are able to do the job, you should obtain the following information:

Their Qualifications

How long they have been in business, how the company operates (e.g. using their own staff or subcontractors), and their experience with similar jobs.

Their References

Obtain contact information for at least three of the contractor's past customers with projects of similar complexity.

Their Suggestions

Ask what they think of your project, what ideas they can offer to improve it or get more value for the money.

Their Estimate

Ask for an initial "ballpark" estimate of costs for your project and when it could be started and finished.

Below is a summary of our "Top 10 questions to ask prospective contractors", including an easy-to-use Contractor Interview Worksheet (see the final page of this document) for you to print out to help you conduct these interviews.

Top 10 Questions to Ask

During your interview, you should expect the renovator to try to find out as much as possible about you and the proposed project. Are they listening carefully? Taking notes? Asking the right questions? Offering ideas and suggestions? At the end of the discussion, do you feel confident that they understand what you want and can help you accomplish it?

Q1: What is the history of your company?

Experience makes a difference. Find out how and when the contractor got into the business, and how long the company has been around. Ask about the contractor's background and relevant education and training—you want to make sure the renovator has both the technical and the business skills required to run a solid company and provide quality services. Also ask about the size of the company; some have their own staff to do the construction work while others rely on subcontractors.

Q2: What services do you offer?

Every contractor will provide a specific range of services. Some will include design services, while others will work with independent designers. You need to have a clear understanding of what services the contractor can provide for your project. If they don't provide all of the services you require, can they recommend someone to do those parts of the job?

Q3: Have you done renovations like ours before?

Some contractors specialize in specific types of projects, such as roof repairs or kitchen renovations. Others offer more general renovation services and can handle a wide

range of projects. It is important to know that a contractor has experience with projects similar to yours—ask how many in the past year or two.

Q4: Can we talk to some of your past clients?

Request a list of past customers you can contact for references. Professional contractors are proud of the work they do and will be happy to provide this information. If the answer is no, stop the interview right there—never hire anyone who is not willing to give you references.

Q5: Can we visit one of your current projects?

Visiting a work site can tell you a lot about how the contractor operates. If the contractor has a current project, ask to visit it and take note of details such as how well the site is organized and whether it is clean and tidy.

Q6: Do you carry Workers' Compensation and business liability insurance?

Hiring someone who is not properly insured could put you at considerable legal and financial risk. Professional contractors will provide you with proof of business liability insurance and Workers' Compensation coverage.

Q7: Will we get a written contract?

If the answer is NO, stop the interview right here. Always, always get it in writing. The contract sets out the agreement between you and the renovator in detail, from the description of the work to the actual materials to be used, to the price you will pay, to the responsibilities of both you and the renovator. If it's not in writing, you have no proof that you and the renovator have in fact agreed to the same thing.

Q8: What warranty do you offer on your work?

A professional contractor provides you with a written warranty that spells out what is covered and for how long. And they deliver prompt follow-up service if there are problems or defects in their work. When checking references, ask past customers about the contractor's warranty service performance.

Q9: How would you deal with our project?

Ask the renovator to explain how they would approach your project. Will design and working drawing be required before they are able to give you a firm price? Will they assist you in choosing products? Will they look after any needed permits? How long would the work take? When can they start? What will the schedule be like? How much will the work disrupt your household? Will they clean up? How will you pay and when?

Q10: What type of communication will you use throughout the job?

Ask the renovator if they are technology-enabled, i.e., do they use software tools to stay connected and keep everyone informed throughout the project? More and more, the renovation sector is getting in line with modern technology, and this can help smooth out the communication throughout the project. You should also be clear about your preference for receiving emails, texts, or phone calls, possibly in addition to the software solution they have in place.

Checking Contractor References

Many people assume that if a contractor is willing to provide customer references, they must do good work. You should not assume this and, in any case, you can learn a lot about your contractor from past clients — even the satisfied ones.

Every professional contractor has strengths and weaknesses, and their past customers are in the best position to tell you what these are.

So once you have customer references from a prospective contractor, use these. You need to know if past projects were completed on time, on budget, and to the customers' satisfaction. If there were any problems or delays, you need to know how the contractor handled and resolved these. Only past customers can tell you.

If a contractor is unable or unwilling to provide customer references, you should not consider hiring them.

Contractor Interview Worksheet

Business Information

Company Name & Representative		
Address		
Telephone #	Cell phone #	
Website URL		Years in Business
HST #		
Contractor Information Range of services provided (type of work, special expertise, etc):		
Questions	Yes	No
Will the contractor provide at least three customer references?		
Will the contractor arrange for you to visit a current or past project?		
Does the contractor have Workers' Compensation insurance?		
Does the contractor have business liability insurance?		
Will the contractor provide you with a written contract?		
Will the contractor provide a written warranty for work performed?		
Was the contractor responsive to your questions and concerns?		

Contractor Interview Worksheet

Interview Notes

Was the contractor able to provide suggestions for how to improve your project or obtain better value for your money? If so, note what these suggestions were:

References

What did the contractor's references have to say about their experience?