

# Finding the right contractor for your project

By Sheila Selby

*Special to the Advocate*

Recently I was working with an interior design client, Sarah, who wanted my help with a bathroom renovation project. During the early stages of our working together, Sarah told me she got a construction cost estimate from a contractor. The "contractor" was actually a friend's brother who is a plumber. The plumber told Sarah he could act as the general contractor (GC) for the project and he would bring in sub-contractors for electrical work, tiling, etc.

Sarah expressed her concern about the plumber's estimate to me. And rightly so. Sarah showed me the quote and the outlined scope of work was so incomplete, I didn't know whether to laugh, cry,

or be angry. There was no mention of electrical work or painting or tiling and no spelling out of what materials were included in the quote. Needless to say, I told Sarah she needed to get estimates from other contractors.

When undertaking any kind of significant home improvement project, whether it's renovating a bathroom, painting your bedroom, or having a custom closet built and installed, I strongly recommend getting three quotes. You need these quotes to compare with each other. The total costs may vary widely; some of these variations may be due to not including certain things in the scope of work. To determine if that's the case, compare the line items in each estimate. Are they all listing the same labor, e.g., disposal of demolished

items, moving furniture, painting two coats, pulling permits? Who's paying for what? What materials are included in the quote, and what materials do you pay for separately?

When choosing a contractor, you want to be able to compare apples to apples. Ask for revised quotes so all three estimates are showing the same line items.

While price is a major consideration when doing any type of project, there are many other things to take into account before making a final decision on a contractor. Some of these are: the contractor's references; the contractor's experience with your type of project; your compatibility with each other; when the contractor can start the project; and whether the business

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owner – the one who's writing the quote - will be on the premises for the project.

The best way to find a contractor is to ask friends or family members who have had similar work done. You'll get an honest opinion from them. While references provided by the contractor can be helpful, keep in mind that the contractor isn't going to give you the name of someone who had a negative experience with him. When speaking with the references the contractor provides, make sure you ask specific questions that require more than a yes or no answer; you'll learn more about the contractor that way.

In Sarah's case, maybe the plumber she got the quote from has experience as a GC (Sarah hadn't gotten any references yet), but maybe he doesn't. He could be one of those people who thinks that because he's worked on the plumbing end of bathroom renovations before, that he can GC a renovation. If the latter's the case, then run. You don't want to be at the bottom of his learning curve.

The most frequent complaint I hear from my clients is how long the project is taking to complete. I have rarely known of a project being completed within the contractor's estimated time period, often through no fault of the contractor. It could be that items are back-ordered or during demolition, a previously-unknown issue was found. To be on the safe side, whatever timeframe the contractor gives you for completion, double it. If you begin a project with the mindset that a delay is inevitable, it will make the whole process easier for you to deal with.

Completed home improvement projects will enhance your life. But getting these projects started and getting them to completion do require diligence and time.

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