

# How to Choose A Heating Contractor

By Sheila Johnson

Choosing a heating contractor to inspect, upgrade, or install a new heating system is a decision that will require some legwork on your part. Hiring the right person for the job is as important as any equipment that may be purchased.

Start by asking for recommendations from friends, coworkers, real estate agents or other home improvement specialists you may have worked with.

Many contractors specialize in heating, ventilation, and air conditioning. They may use the term HVAC in their advertising and promotional pieces. Get estimates from three or four contractors and ask about the list of services each offers. Most people feel more comfortable hiring a contractor who performs installations and also offers repair and maintenance service.

Ask if the installers and technicians are certified by any training organizations. Request references from previous customers even if a friend recommended the contractor. Call the references and solicit positive as well as negative comments. If there was a problem, ask for an explanation and if it was resolved to the customer's satisfaction.

Find out if the contractor has state and local licenses as well as liability insurance. Inquire how long the contractor's company has been in business and where the office is located. In most cases, reliability and depth of knowledge increase with the length of time a contractor has been operating.

Be cautious about accepting estimates over the phone. A reputable contractor will not quote any fees until he has had a chance to visit your home and make an on-site analysis of your needs. Get more than one written quote but keep in mind that the lowest price may not provide the best service.

Your quote should include information about equipment that will be installed and additional upgrades that may be necessary such as new thermostats. It may also detail alterations necessary to improve heat distribution such as work on ducts or vents, as well as information on service policies.

Talk to the contractor about any problems you have had in the past such as rooms that don't get enough heat, or a freezing downstairs and overheated upstairs. Some problems may be resolved simply with vent adjustments while others may require more extensive equipment replacement.

If you are upgrading an old system it is particularly important to choose a contractor who is knowledgeable about energy saving furnaces and who has experience installing new systems. After measuring your home

and inspecting the rooms, he should be able to offer you a heat loss analysis that determines the size furnace you need. He should also give you an estimate of your energy costs for operating the system over the course of a year.

An experienced heating contractor can also provide you with advice on how to make sure your home is effectively weatherized to prevent heat loss. He may also be able to provide duct cleaning and install high-tech air filters to improve the air quality for those with allergies.

Whether you are having a complete new heating system installed or having a part replaced, ask for a written estimate that outlines the work to be performed, the cost of parts and equipment, and labor fees. Request an installation date and inquire about manufacturers' warranties. Does the contractor remove old parts and equipment? If so, will you be charged extra for the service?

Ask what you can do to prolong the life of your furnace and schedule follow-up dates for preventive maintenance. Inquire about the hours for repairs and emergency service.

An experienced heating contractor will ask you a series of questions to determine the type of equipment that suits your home best. For example he might inquire how many people live in your home, how many rooms you have, what the humidity level is, and whether there are rooms that are often unused and closed off. You should also discuss whether you have plans to make additional renovations in the home in the future.