

How To Choose An Air Conditioning Contractor

By Sheila Johnson

When the time comes to install or replace a new central air conditioning system, look for an air conditioning contractor who has had several years experience diagnosing problems and performing installations and repairs.

Ask friends, neighbors and coworkers for the names of contractors they would recommend. It is always better to hire someone who comes with a good referral than to pick someone at random from the phone book. If you can't get a dependable referral, call at least three different contractors for estimates.

Make sure the contractor that you hire complies with state and local codes and regulations and that he has current business and workers compensation insurance.

Talk with the contractor about your home's specific needs and listen carefully to any recommendations that are made. Ask about similar jobs the contractor has performed in the past and request the names of previous customers you can call as references. Take the time to follow up and talk with the references. Ask if they were happy with the quality of the work, if the contractor was dependable, and if there were any problems with installations or faulty equipment.

Try to find a contractor who has several years experience performing repairs and installations. You want someone who not only can service your equipment but who can recommend and install a complete new system if necessary.

A reputable contractor should offer to give you an estimate of necessary services including a breakdown of equipment costs and the fee for labor. Experienced contractors will work with you to find a system that works most efficiently for your home without breaking your budget.

Be sure to ask about warranties and if the contractor will perform follow-up service to make sure the system is working properly.

Talk with the contractor about particular problems you may have encountered in the past such as certain rooms feeling drafty and cold while others feel too warm and dry. The contractor should also be able to help you resolve problems with high humidity and indoor air pollution. He should also take precautions to dispose of used refrigerant and worn parts so that they do not pollute the atmosphere.

A good contractor will offer instructions on how to keep your air conditioning system working efficiently on a day-to-day basis. Don't be shy about asking questions on changing filters, operating the thermostat, etc. Ask about warning symptoms you should be aware of that may signal a problem. Most contractors will let you know how often the system should be serviced and explain preventive maintenance services.

If you are installing a completely new air conditioning system ask the contractor to explain his recommendations and to detail any changes that might be necessary in your duct and vent system.

Keep in mind that the price of the equipment should not be the total basis for choosing one contractor over another. Proper installation and maintenance are important to insure that your system operates safely, reliably, and efficiently. Don't give the job to a company that makes an estimate over the phone without inspecting your home first. Get estimates from multiple contractors but be skeptical of bids that are much lower than the others. A company offering a very low estimate may be trying to scam you with outdated or unreliable equipment.

A good contractor will make recommendations based on the cooling-load calculation that is determined by the size of your home and other factors that impact efficiency. Once the cooling-load calculation has been made the contractor should be able to estimate the annual operating cost for the equipment to be installed.

Quality contractors offer prompt, courteous and professional service. Check to make sure they have an office or shop that has been in business for a few years. If you have any doubts about a particular contractor, check with your local Better Business Bureau or your state attorney general's office to see if the company has any complaints on record.