

How To Choose a Home Builder

By Curt Hagedorn

Buying a new home is, for most people, the most money they'll ever spend on a single item. Building one from scratch is perhaps a step above even that. It might be your life-long dream but it is a large investment and is filled with anxiety. Whether or not you're having a home built in an existing development from a choice of plans, or building your dream home from the ground up, finding a builder you can trust is perhaps the most important decision you can make, after what color to paint the kitchen.

As with every other major financial decision in our lives, choosing a home builder is a task which requires time and research. First, you need to build a list of potential choices. If you're looking at existing developments, drive around and write down the builders' information. Check with your local Better Business Bureau and rule out any builders with serious complaints. Also talk to friends who live in the development you're looking at or who live in a development completed by a builder you're considering. Ask about their experience both in building their homes and in resolving any problems that might have arisen during construction. It's also good to know how amenable builders were to the customization that most developments now offer, as well as how any change orders were handled. What you're looking for is not necessarily a builder who is "nice," (though that is a plus) but a builder who sticks to whatever agreements you make, who is honest, who gets things done on time and who is accommodating where accommodation is necessary, for example, when he makes an error. If you can find someone who stands by the homes they've built even after the fact (or after the home warranty has expired) you've found a gem.

Visit a development where your potential builder has several homes under construction. Talk to the carpenters and other contractors about their experience working for the builder. If these people have a legitimate beef, it's likely that you'll have one down the line as well. Things like delays in payment to contractors, substandard materials and other shortcuts might be something that only the contractors know for sure, and it's worth hanging around and making friends, or maybe bringing some afternoon snacks, to find out what you can about what's going to be the actual construction of your home. If the guys doing the actual work like and respect your potential builder, you probably have a chance of having a good experience with him yourself.

If you're building a house from scratch, it's often a good idea to be guided by your architect. Most established architects have a general contractor, or more than one, that they're comfortable

working with. If your architect trusts the contractor, and the price is right, that's probably good enough for you. Though you should still ask for and follow up with references, and check with the Better Business Bureau or local Home Builder's Association. Be upfront with both architect and contractor about what you find there. Ask for explanation of any discrepancies. Going through these vaguely confrontational exercises now may help avoid much more heated (and expensive) confrontations in the future.

Once you've chosen a home builder your job doesn't end there. Make sure you go over very carefully with your lawyer any contracts or other materials which need to be signed and make sure you have lien waivers in hand to protect your investment from other claims on your builders' resources. Be certain that there are actual consequences for delays and changes on both sides, and that there are benchmark dates for the completion of various items along the way. Though you may think it's natural to want to keep track of the progress of building your new home, make sure that you're knowledgeable enough to know what's really going on with the construction of your home. Be a positive presence on site and communicate with the workers there as well. Remember, that guy who is pouring concrete is responsible for the sturdiness of the foundation of your home. You want him to know you, like you and have a personal stake in doing a good job for you. The same goes for every contractor, sub-contractor and worker on the project until they hand you the keys.