

How to Get Bids on Home Projects So You Don't Waste Your Time or Money

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by Tiffani Sherman

Contributor

Installing a barn door seemed so simple.

The doors look great on HGTV when the hosts hang them on the rail and slide them back and forth. It couldn't be that hard to do, could it?

Then the door arrived. It was unassembled and unpainted. None of the hardware was attached. Installing it would require tools and skills I didn't possess.

I needed help, so I started looking for a professional handyman. I asked neighbors and went online, and I started collecting bids. The bids varied widely both in the amount of time the pros thought hanging the door would take and what it would cost.

Only one handyman asked me lots of questions, so I hired him, even though he wasn't the cheapest, because I thought he knew what he was doing. He arrived with a few extra supplies he knew I'd need based on the questions he had asked me. He even took the old door away. It worked out much better than it would have if I'd tried to do it on my own.

While the process of getting bids can be time-consuming and you may be tempted to go with the first or the lowest one, that's not always the best course of action. By making sure to ask the right questions when evaluating professionals, you can save yourself time, money and frustration in the long run.

Call a Pro or DIY? Here's How to Decide

If you have any doubts about your skills or your project has anything to do with roofing, electrical or plumbing, hire an expert, according to Ed Padilla, founder and director of The Association of Certified Handyman Professionals.

For simple jobs, a handyman might be enough. They can do a wide range of projects like caulking, gutter cleaning, small painting jobs, tile installation, patching drywall, hanging artwork or window coverings and installing light fixtures or ceiling fans.

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Hiring a handyman for a few hours to knock out several small jobs can often be the way to go since some handypeople work at an hourly rate.

But not everyone works that way, including Padilla, who says he only works on a per-project basis instead of by the hour.

“I want to take my time doing it,” he said. “I don’t want to be rushed because someone doesn’t want to pay two hours for a job that they feel it’s going to take an hour. It should be an ‘underpromise and overdeliver’ kind of thing. I might run into some issues.”

Skilled tradespeople usually have training in a particular area like plumbing, electrical, painting, HVAC and flooring. If you need to replace a faucet, add an electrical outlet, repair a leaky air conditioner, paint an entire house, or replace all of your flooring, find someone skilled in that particular area. As a result, you’ll sometimes pay per job instead of by the hour.

Contractors are often used for bigger jobs like room additions and remodeling projects. They manage and oversee entire projects and often hire others to do parts of the work. Contractors often work for a per-project cost.

How to Find the Right Expert for Your Project

No matter what type of expert you’re looking for, you want someone both affordable and skilled. Taking the time to find the right person can keep you from having to fix mistakes or live with bad work later.

Learn More About What the Project Entails

Padilla recommends checking out how-to videos before starting your search for an expert.

“Find out how to do the job — not necessarily that you’re going to put coveralls on and start doing the job — but to find out how it is done, to get the basics of the job just so you know they’re doing what they’re supposed to be doing,” he said.

Having a few bits of knowledge can help you ask better questions when you talk to potential people to hire.

Ask for Recommendations

Many handypeople and tradespeople rely on word of mouth for their business, so friends and family can be a good source of recommendations.

“Word of mouth goes a long way and is the cheapest form of marketing and the best form of marketing,” Padilla said. “Chatty Cathy at church can be your best bet because she’s not afraid to tell you whether or not this person is decent or not.”

Real estate agents also often hire people or companies to do odd jobs when they’re getting homes ready for sale.

You can also get recommendations from community message boards and local hardware stores.

Try Using Websites and Apps

Several apps and websites allow all involved to interview each other to find out if a job is a good match. Some sites also allow you to post the parameters of your project on, and prospective pros will reply to your request:

- **Angie's List:** This is a members-only site where members can see detailed and verified reviews about companies in their area.
- **HomeAdvisor:** The website promotes a screening process where they check criminal background and licenses.
- **Houzz:** While mostly a website for ideas and advice, this site can also help connect people with experts.
- **Thumbtack:** This site and app will connect potential clients and professionals for “pretty much anything,” as the site copy says.
- **Yelp:** This is mostly for finding local businesses and reviews.

Sites like these can give you the ability to efficiently solicit bids for your project, according to Nate Chai, Thumbtack's Senior Director of Pro Engagement.

“You can see reviews, see backgrounds, all within a couple of clicks,” Chai said. “I think it's so much easier than going down a list one by one and repeating your project over and over again to different people.”

Apps like Thumbtack allow a customer to submit the parameters for a project, which the app will then send to professionals who might be able to do it. The customer can look at profiles, experiences and other key factors before deciding who to contact. The customer also determines when to share personal information like phone numbers and addresses with the professional.

Read Reviews

Before you decide who to contact about doing your job, it's important to check out reviews. Some things to look for include:

- Does the review sound like it was written by an actual client? Or does it sound like a friend or family member wrote it?
- Are the reviews all perfect or all horrible? Some people only go online to complain or to gush. The real information you'll want probably lies somewhere between.
- Check for complaints and reviews with the Better Business Bureau.

Chai suggests looking at reviews, but says people often overlook an important part of the reviews: the responses.

“If you're seeing a pro who is super defensive about certain things, that can give you some insight in what it's like to work with that pro versus somebody who is offering great customer service and making things right,” he said.

Here are a few more tips to keep in mind when looking for a professional:

- Look for paid sponsorships where a company might have paid to be listed first in search results.
- Be wary of people who come to your home unannounced looking for work.
- Padilla suggests searching online for both the person and company name to see if anything pops up: “You never know what you're going to find.”

Questions to Ask a Potential Handyperson

Once you have narrowed down the pool to find a few people you would consider doing business with, it's time to get the details.

This person will be coming into your home and doing a job, so make sure you're comfortable with them. Chai says it's also OK to ask what precautions they're taking to keep themselves and their clients safe amid the pandemic.

Padilla says some handypeople overestimate their skills. They look only at the amount of money they can make with a job and not whether they can actually *do* the job.

"Some guys don't know when to say or how to say no when it's something that they can't handle, and that's something that the consumer needs to be on the lookout for," he says.

When looking for a handyperson, be specific about what you want done.

Some questions to ask:

- Do you have the skills to do this?
- Do you have all of the tools you will need?
- How many times have you done this kind of project? (If a person primarily does flooring, be leery of hiring them to install a ceiling fan.)
- How do you plan to approach this project? Ask for plans and a timeline.
- How long do you think it will take and why?
- What is the most challenging part of this project?
- What potential problems do you see?
- Does this project need a permit?
- What materials will you need? Will you get them or will I? Are there other options for materials?
- When are you available to do this project? (If their schedules are wide open, be slightly wary. Good handypeople and skilled tradespeople are often booked well in advance.)
- Do you guarantee your work?
- Can you provide references?

Don't be afraid to ask about licenses and types of insurance. In some states handypeople need to be licensed and bonded to hire themselves out for work. In many states, tradespeople like roofers, plumbers, and electricians need a license.

Padilla says the most important question to ask is about liability insurance. He says you should not let anyone into your house without it.

"A handyman should always have a proof of insurance," he said. "It's a one-page thing that says, 'Yes, this person is insured and company name as well is insured, and has x amount of dollar coverage.'"

Padilla adds it's important to ensure the policy covers something that might happen after the worker has left for the day. Some policies only cover liability if the insured worker is at the job site.

You can also get a little personal with some of your questions. Ask them why they became a handyperson and the qualities they have that make them good at their job.

Padilla suggests asking if the handyperson owns the company. Ownership means they have lots to lose if something goes wrong and much to gain when things go right.

“We’re trying to separate ourselves from the guy making beer money for the weekend,” he said. “We want guys who are buyers in the industry, not a renter, not someone who’s going to be there one week and all of a sudden disappear, and there are a lot of guys doing that.”

Finally, don’t forget to ask a potential handyperson if they have any questions for you.

Get Your Estimate — and Don’t Forget to Discuss Payment

Before hiring someone, get an estimate in writing and ask about how you can pay for the work.

If payment is cash only, you’ll be prepared. Some people will send you an electronic invoice through an app and you can pay with a credit card. Others will use money transfer apps like Venmo or PayPal.

If someone requires full payment up front, you might want to find someone else.

What to Consider When Making Your Decision

Once you get your estimates in writing, you still have to evaluate them and then make a decision. Price shouldn’t be the only factor when deciding which handyperson to hire.

- **Be clear about what the price includes** and whether the professional guarantees their pricing. If they don’t have a guaranteed price, ask them what would be reasons the cost might change.
- **Ask questions about the pricing.** If one estimate seems much higher than another, ask why. Usually, the handyperson can explain the difference. You might find they’re evaluating the project differently than others have.
- **Don’t fall for promises that seem too good to be true.** If one bidder says a project will take a week and the other says a day, something isn’t right.
- **You may be able to negotiate.** If a job is way out of your price range, ask the handyperson if what you could do to make it more affordable. That may mean changing the scope of the project or doing some of the work yourself.
- **Don’t let yourself be pressured.** “I always tell customers to go with your spidey senses,” Padilla said. “If something doesn’t seem right, walk away because there are plenty of handymen out there.”
- **Evaluate them as a professional.** You’re interviewing this person for a job and they should respect you and your time. Do they respond quickly and appropriately? Did they answer all of your questions?

When you make your choice, notify everyone quickly, even the people you do not hire. You never know when that person might be a good fit for another project.

While the work is happening, show an interest in their work and ask questions if you do not understand something they are doing.

When the work is finished and the handyperson is getting ready to leave, make sure you inspect the work thoroughly. It may be difficult to get them back to fix a problem, especially if they have already been paid.

Finally, Chai recommends remembering to be kind during this process, especially with so many small businesses struggling during the pandemic.

“This might not be the right time to try to squeeze that person for every last dollar, knowing that they could be back against the wall, financially speaking,” he said. “I just think a little kindness and understanding can go a long way right now.”

Tiffani Sherman is a Florida-based freelance reporter with more than 25 years of experience writing about finance, health, travel and other topics.