



Finding the Right Builder for You

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From foundation to fixtures: Choosing the right homebuilder for you

It might be that you're driving past a developing neighborhood and fall in love with the model home. Or you know you want a floor plan that's a little outside of the norm and one builder's passion for the project matched your own.

Whatever the deciding factor, the path from A to B should be paved with detailed questions to help find the builder that is right for you.

Conduct research

The Home Builders Association of Illinois (HBAI) suggests looking for a reputable homebuilder. But how do you gauge their reputation?

One way, says Kim Meier, president of KLM Builders Inc., is to look at the company's history. "Longevity is certainly a clue," he says noting KLM has been building for 26 years.

Jeff Benach, co-principal of Lexington Homes, which has new home communities throughout the city and suburbs, says they are among the oldest local homebuilders because of their reputation. "We're constantly working to protect it," he says. "We know that it takes a long time to build up a good reputation, and a heartbeat to ruin it."

Reputable homebuilders are typically eager to share their success stories. And so are their clients. Ask friends, family and acquaintances about their home building experiences. Jamie Smith, vice president of marketing for Smith Family Construction, which includes Prairie Place condominiums in Wheeling, says satisfied homeowners are their best marketing tool. “Our biggest draw comes from word of mouth through current owners, the brokerage community, and people that have had an opportunity to visit Prairie Park and see the quality for themselves,” says Smith.

Meier says to ask a builder for homeowner referrals so you can ask them about their experiences. In addition, Benach says, people should walk through a builder’s community and ask anyone they meet about their experience and the satisfaction with the home.

Quality counts

Everyone wants good quality at a great value, but when it comes to windows and building materials how do you know what to look for to make sure it’s quality construction?

Meier says initially look for the visual experience when going through a model or completed home. Make sure there are no gaps in baseboards and everything looks as it should. Beyond that, a good builder should be able to explain the details of their process and all their products, he says.

“Quality can be visible, but it’s also what you can’t see behind the walls,” he says, adding a potential buyer should ask as many questions as they need to feel educated about the quality of craftsmanship and materials from plumbing to mechanical systems to cabinets. A quality builder should be able to communicate these details in a way anyone can grasp, says Smith.

“Once a customer is able to look around at what is out there, it is usually very easy for them to assess which builders have a higher quality product,” she says.

Another way to check quality is to ask the municipalities where the builder has worked. I know a number of instances where builders haven’t been welcomed back to a town because of quality issues from a previous community,” says Benach.

A style that suits

Style is important and often the easiest part of shopping for a homebuilder. You either like their designs or you don’t. But flexibility is another sign of a good builder.

Meier says they love to show off their model homes, but they are just a concept. KLM has a variety of floor plans and products to choose from, but can build a home tailored to the customer and can provide pricing and specifics for any requested item. “After all, if you are going to build from the ground up you want the home to meet every conceivable need and desire. The home should be a reflection of not just the builder, but you,” Meier says.

At your service

Service quality should be another checklist item when looking for a builder, according to the HBAI. It is most often the process of building a home that people hear the horror stories about, according to Meier — not getting what they wanted, builders being unresponsive or homes taking months longer to complete. The customer service and attention should begin with initial contact with a homebuilder and carry all the way through to delivery.

Meier says builders should conduct separate meetings with the client that include: design and drawing; pre-construction; pre-construction site visit; selection of finishes and fixtures; electrical and technology; walk throughs throughout the construction phase; and a final walk through. Making sure the customer is in the loop and satisfied through the entire process is important, he says.

Being available throughout that process is a sign of a good builder, says Benach. There should be easy vehicles in place to contact customer service. “If the construction personnel are hard to find, question that,” he says.

Smith agrees customer service should be the foundation for a good homebuilder. “There is no better way to recognize customer satisfaction than to see it on their faces and hear it from owners directly,” she says.

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