

10 tips for tackling remodeling projects

How do I find a contractor? Where should I invest my limited remodeling dollars? What building materials are the best to use? If these remodeling questions haunt you and cause sleepless nights, then step back and take some tips from a professional.

Remodeler Danny Lipford, host of the television show Today's Homeowner With Danny Lipford and resident home improvement expert on The Weather Channel and The CBS Early Show, has identified 10 easy steps to tackling home improvement projects.

"Remodeling your home should be an exciting venture, not a trek through alligator-infested waters," says Lipford, who has operated his Alabama-based remodeling company for more than 20 years. "Knowledge is powerful. Understanding how contractors work and especially how you can work as a team with your contractor is your best step toward having a successful start-to-finish remodeling project."

Based on his extensive remodeling work, Lipford has identified the following tips for homeowners who are overseeing either large or small remodeling projects.

Tip No. 1

Spend more time checking out your contractor than your countertops. The most critical factor in any remodel is your contractor – without him or her, nothing happens. First check out whether your candidates have current licenses and insurance (worker's comp and liability) and how reputable they are in business. Next, talk to several past clients (from a list of at least 10) and look at their work (one several years old and one that currently is being worked on). Finally, make sure this person works with you. Does he or she answer your questions? Pay attention to details? Listen to your wants and concerns?

Tip No. 2

Don't take the lowest bid. It's tempting to go for the lowest price, but this isn't like shopping for an item online or in a store. Every contractor offers a different level of service and skill. In most cases, the lowest bidder is offering the lowest level of these key ingredients – not sufficient for many homeowners when the inevitable complications start piling up.

Tip No. 3

Don't bite off more than you can chew at one time. To maintain both your finances and your sanity, don't try to turn your dreams into reality all at once. Stage your project by deciding which things you need to correct first in your house – it might not always be the fun stuff such as remodeling a kitchen or creating a master bath. Start with projects that involve the structure, including basics such as windows and major systems, and then move on to updating finishes.

Tip No. 4

Don't cheap out on what's inside the walls, roof and floors. The finishes are what you'll be showing off to friends and neighbors, but it's the structure, insulation, electrical, plumbing and heating/cooling systems that make your home safe and comfortable long after the finishes wear out. Spend the extra dollar here, and everything else works better. If you don't spend, it is very expensive to go back and correct your mistakes later.

Tip No. 5

Invest in windows and doors – you won't regret it. Windows and exterior doors can be a big part of your remodeling budget, but they aren't the place to cut costs. When you research window options, for instance, look for the brands with the best energy efficiency and lowest

maintenance possible. A good example is Simonton Windows, which makes quality vinyl windows that can be used in any climate and can be ordered with Energy Star approval. For both doors and windows, pay attention to how well they operate, how they seal to the weather and the quality of the hardware used.

Tip No. 6

Plan on spending at least 15 percent more than the contract price. If you've talked to friends, family or neighbors about their remodeling efforts, you know that the final bill *always* costs more than the estimate. Why? Undiscovered surprises and the "while we're at it ..." decisions. There's not much you can do about the former – you don't always know that there's an electrical line running through the wall where you wanted an opening – and the latter is laced with both good opportunity and overspending danger.

Tip No. 7

Get some design help early on with floor plans. The key to how well your remodeled home will "live" is the new floor plan you create. There are lots of standards that need to be applied that will help you size rooms effectively and create a traffic flow that works. Contractors who work with designers (design-build firms) are a great source for this information. So are independent designers, who sometimes set up their own offices, but more typically work with a kitchen and bath showroom or even home centers. Architects, though more expensive, should be considered if you're considering major changes to your home.

Tip No. 8

Consider non-traditional materials – they're often better. Many of today's look-alike materials have been engineered to be better than what they replace. Medium- and high-density fiberboard (MDF and HDF), for instance, are stable, dense substrates used in the best cabinets, furniture and flooring. Interior trim such as moldings, wall niches and ceiling medallions are another example. Urethane pieces, such as those from Fypon, are lighter in weight and less expensive than plaster and aren't affected by moisture or insects like the same products available in wood.

Tip No. 9

Choose classic for a finished look that will last. It's fun to create a kitchen with the latest look, but if you keep the trendiest elements to easily replaceable finishes, it will be easier and less expensive to update in the future. Better yet, use classic materials, styles and colors throughout the room, and updating won't be a topic anytime soon.

Tip No. 10

Keep your payments on pace with the work. Contractors, like anyone in business, are anxious to please their customers in order to secure the next payment. It's important to keep this leverage so you keep your contractor's full attention. (Remember that you are competing with your contractor's other clients to a degree.) It could be beneficial to withhold 10 to 15 percent of the job cost at the end of the remodel to make sure your contractor completes everything to your satisfaction.

For more information on remodeling projects, products and ideas, visit www.dannylipford.com.