

# AT YOUR SERVICE

## Home Service Pros



# Getting Off to a Good Start

Cost is a consideration — but so are your larger goals

Home improvement and home renovation projects promise us the opportunity to live a better, more convenient, more efficient life. But diving into these projects without a clear idea of where you'd like to go will make it impossible for home service pros to adequately address your needs. You could be saddled with cost overruns, long delays and huge headaches.

Be prepared to discuss what you're hoping to accomplish, but also how much you want to spend and the specific timeline in which you'd like to see the job completed. The National Association of the Remodeling Industry reminds homeowners to factor in cost, quality and your return on investment before beginning these complex undertakings.

## WHAT'S THE GOAL?

Home service pros can help you turn most any plan into reality, but they need a detailed roadmap. Is this simply an add on, or are you looking for a stand-alone structure? Does your reno idea go beyond updating the floors? What about cabinets and fixtures? It all adds up, and without a clear goal in mind, these additional jobs might end up breaking your budget. You'll need to account for the cost of both material and labor, since con-



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tractors will be on site longer. Earmark a specific dollar figure in order to help guide them toward a conclusion that's both achievable and within your means.

## STICK TO THE PLAN

These changes are often initially guided by very

straight-forward questions. Can I afford this project right now? Will these changes increase the value of the property? Can I find the right home service professionals at the right price to complete the work? Once you're underway, however, it's important to stick to the previously

agreed-upon plan.

There are usually surprises along the way, and those day-to-day problems can quickly eat into even the most contentious person's contingency plan. Things go downhill even more quickly if you suddenly begin switching out countertops, cabinet styles or appli-

ances — or, worse, adding entirely new projects since they may require more design and engineering. Costs are part of the timeline — so the longer it takes, the more expensive everything becomes. Budget discipline will help give you confidence to go forward with your plans.

# Prepare For the Warmer Months

Your HVAC may need a good looking over before things heat up

If winter has left you frosty and frigid, you may have a steamy future ahead as temperatures rise. Now is the time to hire a local service pro to take a look at your heating, ventilation and air-conditioning system — otherwise known as HVAC.

While searching, however, you're likely to find pages and pages of service and repair company results. Determining which one is best prepared to ready your system can seem like a daunting task. Thankfully, there are a number of key indicators which will help when searching for a home service pro to look over your HVAC.

## DO YOUR RESEARCH

Work done before a contractor rings the doorbell will ensure you get the best quality service at a reasonable price. Search for home service pros who are properly certified. Reputable HVAC companies hire employees who have North American Technician Excellence certification. NATE is the nation's not-for-profit certifying organization for HVAC and refrigeration techs. Technicians have to earn re-certification every two years, meaning they remain up-to-date on industry developments and new standards. Make sure any contractor is also properly insured, with



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both business and liability policies. This protects you and the service pro in case there's a mishap with the equipment or in your home.

## ASK AROUND

Once you've confirmed that the paperwork is in place, look into their references. Check trusted websites including Yelp, NextDoor and Google for

online testimonials or complaints, and ask the contracting company directly to speak with other customers. Be particularly wary if an HVAC company refuses to provide these references, since that could be a sign that they have burned some bridges. Check in with the Better Business Bureau, and ask friends, family and neighbors for their recom-

mendations, too. Once you've gathered this wealth of guidance and advice, you'll be able to make a hiring decision with the peace of mind that comes from doing your homework.

## REQUEST DETAILED ESTIMATES

Once you've narrowed down the possibilities, ask for detailed estimates from sever-

al contractors. They should spend a good amount of time looking over your system in order to evaluate your needs. Replacement systems will be tailored to the size of your home, insulation details, number of floors and windows. Repairs will involve duct system and unit inspections. Get itemized written estimates for comparison, while noting warranty options.

# Home Improvement Trends

A number of projects has exploded since the pandemic began

All that time at home during the early days of the pandemic led many to reassess their living spaces. But the home improvement boom has continued, even years later. If you're still waiting to jump on the bandwagon and aren't sure where to begin, contact a service pro to discuss whether one of these trending home improvement projects is right for your property.

## LARGER WINDOWS

If you're looking to let more light in, don't simply settle for more windows. Think bigger — much bigger. Floor-to-ceiling versions are transforming spaces at an increasing rate. They help create a more open, luxurious space, while making every room appear to be both larger and more inviting. And remember: They don't have to be square. Talk to your contractor about exciting alternatives like arched designs.

## BUILT-INS ARE BACK

Bookcase-style built-ins have long been a thing of the past. But emerging new versions promise far more functionality — and a better sense of style. Recessed spaces can house televisions, multi-media equipment, and buffet sets, and they're being constructed now with contrasting materials, inlays and crown molding



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to create a bolder impact.

## CREATING MUDROOMS

Mudrooms similarly fell out of fashion, despite their obvious every-day uses. Better organizational designs have led to a resurgence, as mudrooms now feature more functional and attractive options for storing shoes, umbrellas, coats and more — along with

sink areas for easy cleanup. Talk to your contractor about how one could be incorporated into your entry.

## ECO-FRIENDLY OPTIONS

Add repurposed materials into your renovation project, or partner with eco-conscious companies to create a new look while taking care of Mother Earth. Talk to your

contractor about a focus on wellness, too. That may include spa spaces, a library for quiet reading, redesigned bathrooms, a yoga gym or tranquil rooms to simply escape it all.

## OUTDOORS IN

Many of us finally reconnected with nature during the quarantine era when people

were gathering less. A big renovation project can give you the chance to bring similar concepts into your inside space. You might change the layout of your entryway to make it flow more organically, choose more natural materials like wood, stone or linen, or take down walls and enlarge windows so sight lines take you all the way outside.

# Reviewing a Contract

Carefully read over everything before signing a contract

So you've found the right home service pro, after looking over their credentials and a detailed estimate. Next you'll enter into a formal agreement that will outline what work is to be done, materials to be used, how much it will cost and when it should be finished, barring outside issues.

If something is incorrect or left out, your signature could mean you end up with an incomplete project that doesn't suit your taste or meet your needs.

## WHAT'S IN THE DOCUMENT?

Several key elements are part of a professionally executed contract that protects both you and the home service pro. The document should include a job description that details what's to be done, with a detailed outline of costs and the materials to be used. There should be dates to start and complete the work, as part of an agreed-upon project timeline. Payments should be tied to job-completion milestones. The contract should make clear that securing the necessary permits is the responsibility of the company.

Penalties should be in place for missing detailed completion dates. There should be a stated procedure for changing work orders. Insurance, bonding and licensing details must be



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included. Protections should also be built into the contract, including a termination clause describing how the deal can be voided by either the homeowners or the contractor as well as a lien release that's in place in the event there is a dispute with any subcontractor or the company's workers.

## WRITING IT OUT

There aren't universal rules about some issues, including down payment. In some places, a written contract isn't even required. But it's smart to request one anyway. This ensures that expectations are defined and sets a schedule for when benchmarks including

work and pay are expected to happen. Research state laws before signing to make sure the agreement meets local standards.

If regulations set a baseline figure for down payments, try to agree to a figure as close to that as possible. The lower the upfront cash outlay, the more

incentive contractors have to expedite the work on the way to a quicker finish. Check in regularly as work progresses, and set up regular meetings to catch up on how things are going and to discuss any issues that have popped up along the way. The more you're involved, the fewer times you'll be surprised.

# Hiring a Landscaper

Ready to let somebody else do the mowing and edging?

Landscaping professionals can relieve the stress and strain of maintaining your lawn, shrubs and flower beds. They may even have some exciting new ideas that transform the space. Hiring local professionals also routes money back into your hometown economy.

But there are key considerations before hiring a landscaper that include everything from qualifications to price. Negotiating may be crucial to getting the best deal, since in some cases there may be different pricing structures based on how often they'll have to come out during off seasons.

## SEARCH TIPS

Landscaping companies come in all sizes, from local neighborhood companies to nationwide behemoths. Hometown independent contractors will typically offer more straight-forward service options like mowing, spreading mulch, planting and perhaps even sprinkler installation and maintenance. Larger outfits may offer a more comprehensive package that includes whole-space transformations and robust teams to more quickly complete each visit. In many cases, the choice that's right for you will come down to what you need – and what you're willing to pay.



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## THINGS TO CONSIDER

Once you've evaluated your personal needs, narrow your search to those who provide these services at a price you're willing to pay. Next, check out online reviews and their ratings at independent websites like NextDoor, Yelp and Google. Check references and ask around. If neighbors are using a lawn service, they may be able to provide critical tips

on who to hire.

Pricing for regular upkeep might be similar with several different companies, while larger landscape installation jobs are more widely varied. Landscape curbing will up the price tag on sod installation, for instance. Mowing will be cheaper than regrading or hydro-seeding. In-ground features and architecture associated with things

like outdoor grills can run into the thousands of dollars. You may be able to find seasonal discounts either online or in local publications.

## NEGOTIATING A DEAL

Prospective landscapers should provide a pricing sheet that details costs for each service, along with schedules and payment

options. Inquire about discounts associated with bundling. For instance, installation of a stone pathway might be offered at a cheaper price if service pros are already on site doing other general landscaping jobs. Find out if your pricing changes when plants go into hibernation for the winter. And don't forget to ask if there are any other deals you're unaware of.

# How to Avoid a Scam

The vast majority of service pros are trustworthy — but don't let your guard down

Homeowners aren't often the target of scam artists, since the vast majority of service pros are upstanding members of our communities. Unfortunately, however, the potential to come across a shady contractor exists — so be aware of the warning signs.

They may be looking to make a quick buck by doing substandard work, or they may take upfront payment for a job and never complete it. The Federal Trade Commission found that one in 10 American adults are annually tricked by some kind of scam or fraud — and many of them are related to home-improvement projects like these. Here's how to make sure you're not the next victim.

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Be wary of any contractor who approaches you or your home and asks for your business. Reputable service pros aren't going door to door looking for work. The Federal Trade Commission cautions against working with anyone who only accepts cash or asks for a bulk payment before starting the work.

Don't allow anyone to use material left over from a previous project, since it could be



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damaged or stolen. Avoid those who ask you to handle the permitting process. They should have the proper credentials, good references — and a listed phone number and website.

## LENDING RED FLAGS

Beware of a contractor who wants you to finance a home improvement project through

their own lender. Check with independent loan officers yourself, in order to get a clear idea on what you'd be approved to spend and the agreement's terms and conditions. Institutions who you've previously banked with are preferable but if you decide to get several loan estimates, make sure they are with trusted lenders.

## DOCUMENT IT ALL

Get everything on paper, since signed contracts give you the most protection if things go wrong. Court cases involving renovations and construction are typically decided through documentation. Refuse any cash-only or handshake deal, those who make upfront payment requests, and anyone who

employs a high-pressure sales technique. Take your time and examine all documents carefully before signing. If you feel uncomfortable with the jargon, ask an attorney to help you go over everything. There will be a fee for this service, but it might save you big bucks down the road. In the meantime, you'll know exactly where you stand.

# Get Spring Cleaning Help

When it's time to tidy up, consider hiring someone to do it right

Spring brings longer days because of daylight savings time, and a long tradition of tackling the dirt, clutter and grime that's built up over the winter. In some cases, you may feel overwhelmed by it all. Or you just might want to give a home the kind of scrub down that your busy schedule doesn't allow.

In any case, a home-cleaning service can have your spaces looking sparkling and new, just in time to switch out boots and mittens for flip-flops and shorts.

## INSIDE THE NUMBERS

Nearly 80% of U.S. households participate in some sort of spring cleaning every year, according to one study from the American Cleaning Institute. The process typically takes around six days from start to finish. However, almost 35% of respondents didn't believe they clean often enough. More than 40% honestly couldn't remember the last time they cleaned their refrigerator.

Nearly half said their dirty windows were the biggest priority as winter gave way to warmer months. The next places listed included closets and drawers, then ceiling fans, curtains and blinds, carpets and flooring, linens and home-office space. That's a



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daunting list for anyone to handle, in particular when pressed for time with work and family obligations.

## FINDING A SERVICE PROVIDER

Evaluating potential house-cleaning service pros is a multilayered process. You should have a conversation with a company representa-

tive, but also should speak directly to the person who will be visiting your home. You want to be comfortable with the price and the services rendered, but you'll also be allowing someone into your private space. So it's important that there is a comfort level before deciding on any new hire. This is especially so if you're going to be

gone when the cleaning is underway.

## EVALUATING CANDIDATES

Create a budgeted amount that you can comfortably set aside for this expense before getting estimates. Companies should schedule an in-home visit in order to visually confirm the size of the job. Final

cost estimates can vary, depending on the number of rooms and frequency of cleaning visits. Credentials, insurance, references and a background check are all recommended parts of the vetting process. Look for online reviews on independent sites, and ask friends, family and co-workers for recommendations.