

Consumer Tips on Choosing a Heating and Air Conditioning Contractor

While homeowners choose to undertake many kinds of home renovations, installation and/or repair of heating, ventilating, air conditioning and refrigeration equipment is usually considered an exceptional measure. Yet the heating and cooling system in any building is a critical factor in occupant comfort and quality of life. The purchase of a furnace, air conditioner or ventilation system is a major investment and deserves careful consideration.

Most provinces require the hiring of a licensed or qualified HVACR tradesperson to perform the work because of the safety concerns and consequences involved. However, homeowners frequently do not distinguish among contractors on anything other than price. Consumers should be aware that the lowest price is not always the best value!

There are some obvious red flags to look for when you are shopping around for a contractor. For example, reputable contractors will not quote prices without seeing the job! Reputable contractors will not request large cash advances prior to the delivery of any equipment or materials. And any reputable contractor will readily provide a full business address as well as a telephone number where they can be reached. Apart from these more obvious tip-offs, there are a number of guidelines that a homeowner should keep in mind in order to get the best value when hiring a heating and air conditioning contractor.

1. Finding Reputable Contractors

You may wish to contact neighbours, friends, relatives and co-workers for opinions on work done recently by an HVACR contractor. You can also use the business directory for your area, or newspaper, radio and television ads to identify contractors. In most cases you will be better off selecting contractors that promote the quality of their service and equipment at a reasonable rate, rather

than just low prices. It may be best to select experienced firms. If possible, try to visit their office.

You will want to determine whether the contractor has appropriately certified personnel on staff (sheet metal, refrigeration & air conditioning or electrician journeymen, gas fitters, etc.), whether 24-hour emergency service is available, and whether the contractor offers maintenance and service agreements after the installation and warranty. The warranty policy should be clearly stated for equipment, materials and labour and should indicate who is responsible for honouring the warranty.

2. Getting Estimates

Arrange for the contractor to come and inspect the job site. Some small jobs may be priced out and an estimate written immediately, but larger jobs may require additional time to price properly and to prepare a heat loss and gain calculation for proper sizing of the equipment.

Make sure that each estimate is written on a proper form that is easily read and understood. When comparing the estimates received, the statements about the work to be performed and the materials used should be of comparable quality, or the estimates should make proper allowances for any differences. Be sure that the estimate includes the proper permits and licenses. The warranty policy should be clearly stated for equipment, materials and labour. If the contractor uses sub-contractors for some of the actual work, these should be listed on the proposal and in the contract.

3. The Contract

The contract is the agreement between the homeowner and the contractor that specifies what work will be performed and gives a firm dollar value on that work. It is a legal, binding document when signed by both parties, so be sure you understand and agree with the contents before signing. Any changes or additions

in the work to be done should never be made without those alterations being written into the contract and initialled by both parties. If extra billing is to occur, it must be clearly stated and initialled by both parties.

In addition to the name, address and telephone number of the consumer and the contractor, the contract should clearly state the following items:

- required licenses and permits must be purchased by the contractor;
- responsibility for removal of old equipment and materials;
- warranties and guarantees on materials and labour;
- approximate start and completion dates unless specific dates and times are agreed upon;
- price and terms of payment.

The contractor should also provide orientation regarding operation and maintenance of the equipment, and should leave an operations and maintenance manual with the consumer.

4. Payment Methods

There is no standard method of payment, so the payment schedule will vary from company to company. In any case, the payment schedule should be easy to understand and clearly stated if interest charges are applicable. A nominal deposit may be requested. Get a receipt for your deposit or have the amount shown on the contract and get the salesman to initial it. All payments should be made directly to the company named in the contract.

5. Insurance

It is important that the contractor and any sub-contractors each have public liability and property damage insurance, and be able to produce a certificate of

good standing from the Workers' Compensation Board. You may wish to ask who the policy is with and follow up to verify that it is current.

6. References

Reputable contractors will be more than willing to give you the names and addresses of customers they've done work for in your area. You may wish to contact the Better Business Bureau, which maintains records of consumer complaints about its members. You should also ask whether the contractor is a member of the Heating, Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Contractors of Canada (HRAC-Canada), the industry association for heating and air conditioning contractors in Canada. HRAC requires its members to carry relevant trade, fuel safety and municipal licenses as well as workers' compensation. A company's membership in HRAC tells you that the company is properly licensed and that they are committed to continuous improvement through education and training.