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## Choosing The Right Company For The Job

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The companies you choose when buying, selling, repairing or building a home are decisions which will affect your financial future. You will be relying on these professionals for advice in making decisions about potentially the largest investment you will ever make, your home. Being an educated consumer will guide you in making sound financial decisions where your investment is concerned.

Whether you are buying a home, building a home, remodeling your home or trying to save energy in your home there are a few basic rules to follow when selecting contractors to perform the work. The first and MOST IMPORTANT rule: **AVOID CONFLICTS OF INTEREST!!** What I mean by conflicts of interest is this. Do not rely on the advice of parties having a direct financial interest in the transaction. If you are making a decision on whether to purchase a home, your real estate agent may not have your best interest in mind when referring a home inspector. Many unqualified inspection companies gain referrals by doing things the real estate agents way. This can only hurt you as a consumer.

There has been a wave of such behavior in recent years. The black mold scare over the last few years has brought out an army of so-called "mold experts". These so-called experts claim to be certified mold inspectors. The question is...certified by who? I have seen mold inspector classes pop up as fast as mold itself. A two day class would hardly qualify a person to make an omelet, yet consumers are relying on such persons to make decisions which could affect their health and their finances. It has been my experience that there are many more unqualified companies than qualified companies and unfortunately it is costing the consumer. Over the past few years we have evaluated several homes with major problems. The homeowner is always surprised because they had the home inspected. Unfortunately the consumer did not follow rule number one and avoid conflicts of interest. The unqualified or new home inspector relies heavily on real estate agent referrals for business and finding significant deficiencies could cause a buyer to re-negotiate or cancel an offer. This would result in being labeled a "deal killer" and referrals would dry up. Of course this is not always the case, but it is something consumers need to be aware of.

The newest arena for contractors, inspectors, etc. is home energy. With natural gas prices expected to increase by 50-70% this winter, energy has become a major concern for homeowners. It has also brought out an army of energy experts. Building energy is a difficult subject and requires the expertise of a trained specialist using very specialized equipment. The knowledge and skills required would take many years to achieve, not weeks. However, with the energy crunch upon us, I have no doubt that energy inspector classes will be popping up in home inspector magazines all over the country which offer to make you an expert in as little as 3 days. We will then see energy inspections being offered as part of the inspection for as little as \$50.00. This brings me to rule number two, **Verify The Certification of Your Contractors Through Trusted Organizations (RESNET, EPA, ENERGY STAR, HUD, ICC, NHBA)**. Start by

contacting your state weatherization program for referrals of **certified energy raters**. An energy audit should include an infrared scan of the home, blower door test, duct test to determine if ducts are leaky and a combustion analysis of the heating system to determine safety and efficiency. Programs such as Energy Star, Energy Efficient Mortgages, Fannie Mae, etc. all require that energy raters be RESNET Certified. This assure that the rater has been trained and tested in performing energy audits and ratings. Raters must be trained and pass testing which includes, building science, geometry, energy measurements, etc.

Again, rule number one is stressed, **Avoid Conflicts of Interest!!** Energy raters are independent and neutral third party verifiers that have no financial interest in the home or services which may be required. It is not a good idea to call in a window contractor to decide if you need windows, or an insulation contractor to decide if more insulation is the answer. Although the home may need either one, that is determined by the energy rater looking at the “measured performance” of the building and is based on those measured numbers. The numbers that are determined by your energy rater can also be used for comparisons to evaluate the effectiveness of repairs and updates which are performed.

The third rule which I should mention is this, **Avoid Contractors That claim to know numbers without measuring!!** A heating contractor that claims to know air flow, carbon monoxide levels, O2 levels, etc. without measuring may simply be telling you a story. The same is true of the window contractor that claims your windows are leaking or the contractor that claims to know where or how your building is leaking. The only true way to know and verify the performance of a building or it's system is to measure them following accepted standards using calibrated equipment to verify the measurements. Having conditions such as combustion air guessed at could have deadly consequences.

During a recent energy audit I was performing a combustion analysis on an aging boiler in Cleveland Heights. I discovered that carbon monoxide levels from the boiler were over 10,000 parts per million when the boiler was turned on! That level would kill the average adult in less that 5 minutes if a blockage caused it to enter the home. I was informed by the customer that the system was recently inspected by a local heating contractor and given a clean bill of health!! The contractor did not know because he did not properly measure!

A proper evaluation of the home is an important first step in evaluating the building, energy issues, indoor air quality, etc. This evaluation should be performed by an **Independent Expert** that has no ties to any parties with a financial interest. This will allow you to fully understand your home and your options for making your home safe and comfortable.