

# Built on Trust

HOW DO YOU CHOOSE A DESIGN-BUILD CONTRACTOR TO UNDERTAKE A MAJOR HOME RENOVATION? DENNIS GEHMAN OF **GEHMAN DESIGN REMODELING** HAS A FEW IDEAS. **BY BILL DONAHUE**



**“Most homeowners only embark on a major renovation project once or twice in their lifetime,”** says Dennis D. Gehman, MCR, president of Gehman Design Remodeling in Harleysville. **“They don’t have the time or the expertise, and that’s why they need an experienced contractor they can trust.”**

But how can someone know when they have identified the “right” contractor? Having founded his design-build firm in October 1990, Gehman has a uniquely informed perspective. He suggests interviewing several contractors before determining which ones have the skill, experience, and personality to complete the job to the client’s satisfaction. And when he says “interview,” he means it. He advises asking each candidate several probing questions, starting with the ones outlined below.

- How long has the contractor been in business?
- Has the contractor completed other projects similar to the one you have in mind, and does the contractor’s design style match yours? Can they show you plans and before-and-after photos, and provide the names and contact information of past clients so you can get their perspective?

- Does the contractor have industry certifications, such as those earned through NARI, the National Association of the Remodeling Industry? Meaningful NARI certifications include MCR, Master Certified Remodeler; MCKBR, Master Certified Kitchen and Bath Remodeler; CKBR, Certified Kitchen and Bath Remodeler; CLC, Certified Lead Carpenter; UDCP, Universal Design Certified Professional; and CRPM, Certified Remodeling Project Manager.
- Does the contractor have a team or work by himself or herself? If they have a team, are they an in-house outfit, or do they bring in 1099 subcontractors?
- Does the contractor have a showroom? Do they offer 3D design through home-design software such as Chief Architect so you can see renderings of the finished product in advance?
- Have they won awards for their projects, such as those judged by prestigious organizations such as NARI?

“If contractors are not free with this kind of information, that’s a big yellow flag,” says Gehman, whose firm has won an award for its work every year since 1996. “As you’re asking these questions, you should be able to get a sense of how comfortable a contractor is talking about their work. If they don’t like answering

questions, that’s another very solid yellow flag. After you get their answers, you want to feel better about their capabilities and how they run their business, not worse.”

Gehman also recommends asking contractors to clarify their warranties for work completed. In Gehman Design Remodeling’s case, the firm provides a five-year workmanship warranty and a 10-year structural warranty. It’s also worth discussing who will be in charge of the project. With each project Gehman Design Remodeling undertakes, a remodeling consultant with at least one NARI certification will lead a project development team, and then hand off the project to a dedicated project manager assigned to the project on every workday from start to finish.

As for determining which contractors to interview, Gehman advises widening the circle beyond recommendations from friends and family. A local building inspector, for example, may be a good resource. While the inspector may not feel comfortable making open recommendations, he or she will usually provide honest feedback if asked about their experiences with a particular contractor.

The “right” contractor will bring more to the table than an award-winning portfolio and glowing client recommendations. Gehman says personality is important, too—whether the homeowner and contractor are a good “fit” for one another.

“God has made us with different personalities, and none are right or wrong,” he adds. “We do well to respect everyone, but that doesn’t mean we should choose to work with everyone.”

Major renovations require a two-step process—the design phase and the construction phase. Perhaps a design-build firm provides a stunning design, but their personality gives the homeowner pause. Homeowners may choose to hire a firm for the design only, and then have another firm tackle the construction.

“Most contractors will get the work done eventually, but you have to consider the smoothness of the process,” Gehman adds. “Probably 99 percent of our clients are living in their homes while we’re there. If the process is drawn out, it can be a nightmare, or at least a major inconvenience. But if you’ve done your due diligence and hired a true professional who knows what they’re doing, it should be a fairly smooth process.” ■

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