



GET THREE QUOTES



An insightful read for homeowners, lenders,
contractors, and tradespeople

BILL MAUGER



GET THREE QUOTES

A look at different perspectives of the quoting process



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Introduction

This book is for people who are considering a home improvement project, or who have already invested in one. It is also for tradespeople and contractors who do not have many people who they can bounce their ideas off of pertaining to their quoting and renovations processes. Hopefully by reading these pages, and by drawing on your own experiences, you will develop a better understanding of your project and your contractor's perspective.

This book, though brief and to the point, goes beyond the quoting process. Hopefully you will enjoy the additional content.

Even though I've owned a home improvement business since 2006, I can say I have not seen it all and that plenty of projects have unique situations and circumstances to consider. Yet, with more than 2,300 projects completed, it would be fair to say that I have gained some valuable insights into this type of business, including the quoting process.

I invite you to explore the different perspectives of the quoting process in hopes that you will find information that will be useful as you obtain quotes from contractors for your future home repair and/or home improvement projects.

I feel blessed to have come from a family of tradespeople. As a child I followed my dad, brothers, and uncles around observing them as they worked. Hopefully I didn't pester them too much. I felt they imparted many skills to me along the way, which instilled a level of curiosity in me and a desire to overcome obstacles. Even now, I maintain a keen interest in helping people solve the challenges they encounter as they repair, renovate, and/or make improvements to their home.



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I help a wide variety of customers as they make choices that influence the outcome of their projects. My experience comes from working with owners & managers of:

- ▶ single-family, multi-family, and even tiny homes
- ▶ strata (condominium and townhouse) properties
- ▶ commercial buildings in the manufacturing, industrial, and retail sectors

And finally, consulting with people who value my input on their projects and business progression.

Bill Mauger

October 14, 2022





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Forward

For ease of reference, this book is broken down into topics. You can read through the book, or refer to the Table of Contents which will direct you to the topic that interests you.

Whether you are the client or the contractor, I hope you find some good nuggets of information that will be of use to you during future home improvements or repairs. As always, feel free to reach out to Service@YourLocalHandyman.com for any additional support.

Terminology:

In the spirit of eliminating some confusion, I will describe some of the terminology used in this book which pertains to residential construction. Here are some commonly used terms:



Repair, Remodel, Renovation, Home Improvement, Home Makeover.

These terms are used interchangeably and generally refer to the work being done.



Remodeler, Home Renovator, Renovations Contractor, Contractor, or General Contractor (GC).

These terms generally refer to the company you hire to do the work.



Project Manager or Renovations Contractor (again).

Can refer to the person who facilitates the process of completing your project, and can include coordinating sub-trades and ensuring materials are being delivered to your project on time. This person is also the primary contact person for your project, unless you are assuming this role. I generally do not recommend that the client act as the GC.



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Carpenter, Tiler, Painter, Plumber, Electrician, or other trades specialist.

These are the “boots on the ground” people who are moving the project forward each day.



Tradesperson.

This is a title that can include a man or a woman who specializes in a specific construction modality.



Supplier.

Is a term for the company supplying the materials to the company you hire to do the work.

Every once in a while, even the most experienced tradesperson or contractor will be taken by surprise by some unexpected circumstance.

It could be that they overlooked some aspect of the job and their quote was too vague, or some hidden damage was found and there was a lack of clarity about who would pay for unforeseen extras.

One thing is for sure; clear communication goes a long way, and an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!



There is a humorous formula some people in the construction industry refer to when asked how they quote jobs. It states:



“I estimate what it will cost to get the job done.
Then I double it, and hope to break even”.

AUTHOR UNKNOWN





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CHAPTER - 01

Different Perspectives (Lender, Client, Contractor)

Not surprisingly, there are different perspectives and priorities when it comes to home improvement projects.

The Lender's Perspective:

If you will be securing funds from a financial institution (or other lender) to pay for your home improvement project, it would be wise to consider them as a financial partner in the project. As such, they need to know the highlights of the project. They may not be as interested in colours, textures, and fixtures, as they are with how much and for how long, so that they can



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do a general risk assessment to determine your credit worthiness and financing costs. The risk assessment is necessary for them to ensure they're not over-exposed with your project, or with you as a client. They want to ensure that you will be able to service the debt your project will incur. They want to feel assured that there is a sufficient plan in place between you and your contractor. Hence, they may ask to see at least one written quote, and possibly a scope of work for your project (aka: what's the plan?).

After the lender's thirst for information and specifics has been satisfied, and they have granted you the amount of money you requested, they will back away and let you get on with your project.

The Client's Perspective:

From the client's perspective, it would be a fair statement to say that the client wants to compare the value that they would obtain for their dollar, from one contractor to the next. The client will be asking him or herself, is this contractor's quote on point, within the budget, or out of the ballpark? ***I will expand on this idea a bit later***, but for now let's look at other things the client is looking for.





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Often times, the client is looking to the contractor for insight and guidance. They want to be confident that the contractor has sufficient knowledge to complete the project, and that the contractor has responsible employees or sub-trades to complete the project. They want to know how busy the contractor is, to determine if they can complete the project within an acceptable time frame. They want to know that they can trust the contractor. If the client is making this decision with a partner, what are the partner's observations? Finally, what does their gut tell them about the contractor?

The Contractor's Perspective:

The contractor has his or her own list of questions and concerns. For example, will they be able to quote & complete this project on time? Free quote, or for a fee? How interesting is this project? Do they have the right mix of talent for this project? How organized is the client? Is the client likeable and cooperative? Who is the project manager, is it the contractor or the client? What are the obstacles - travel time, supplier locations, special order of materials, disposal site location, off-street or on-street parking? Will there be other tradespeople there at the same time? Tool security? Access? Will payment be an issue? Other?

The Project Research Stage

SO... You're embarking on a home improvement project that will hopefully make you fall in love with your home again, or perhaps for the first time. This is exciting.

Question: Did you ever load the family into the car on a beautiful sunny day and drive around aimlessly, taking in the views, stopping to take amazing pictures, and perhaps even sampling new foods and activities? Well, renovating a house is not like that. This is because well intentioned tradespeople will be in your home to do their work. Sometimes it can feel as though they are in your personal space, even though they are there to help the project along; however, with a bit of preparation and patience for the process, it can be a very rewarding experience. The goal is to be happy with the end result.



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As with most people, you will likely collect a mountain of new information, from which you can draw on when making decisions about your home improvement project. This helps you build a picture of what your project will end up looking like. After all, you're building the vision for your new and improved home-sweet-home. Often what sparks an interest in doing a home improvement stems from visiting a friend's place and seeing the work they "just had done". Other times, it's watching some of the home improvement shows and picturing yourself being that happy if you had a home improvement of your own to enjoy. Once this research stage has started, it is an exciting discovery process.

You'll get excited when you see your vision taking shape, or when that paper folder you started a year ago starts filling up. Soon, you will have a box full of product samples. You might even find yourself collecting pictures, website links that portray images and ideas, hunting for samples, discovering new possibilities, colours and textures. This process can restore a sense of hope that you will LOVE your home again. For most people, this is the fun stage!

There is a chance you'll want to hire a designer or obtain the advice of your contractor to obtain a look that is current and neutral so that the home improvement will either retain or build value in your home. This is obvious for those of you who are doing the work so that you can sell in a competitive housing market.

This discovery stage can become overwhelming at times. At some point, it becomes necessary to make sense of all the new information you've obtained, so that you can determine what is useful, what you cannot use, and what you need more information about. In any event, this stage should be either well under way, or completed before hiring a contractor. This way, when you first meet with your contractor, he or she will see that you know what you want, or at least, know that you've put considerable work into your project already.

Contractors like to see that their clients have researched their project. Time invested in research brings the project closer to a start date, even before you meet with your contractor. Therefore, this investment of your time should be considered valuable. If you are not the only decision maker involved in the home improvement, it is important to reassure any other person deciding on the different aspects of the project, that their research time is an important contribution to the project's success.

Was That **THREE** Quotes, or **FREE** Quotes?

A bit of back story:

In recent history, referring to the past 20 years, there have been an abundance of television shows focusing on the highs and lows of home improvement projects. As time passed, they all adapted to a standard of recommending that consumers go out and obtain three quotes for their projects. This is a good practice in principle, as it not only educates the consumer of cost fluctuations from one company to the next, but it also shows a glimpse into the contractor's mind, and how they approach their work. Above and beyond the consumer's own research, the contractor provides insight into what is popular, especially when resale value is a driving force for



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the renovation. They also make recommendations of materials based on client colour and texture preferences. They will comment on what lasts and what doesn't last. You gain valuable knowledge from the contractor. They recommend things based on your budget, priorities, and personal preferences. This interaction is a fascinating process.

Let's step back a bit further, to the 1980's, which is when my father and older brothers were contractors. During this time, construction work was scarce, unless they had already built a good reputation for themselves. Even then, the world was in a recession, and money wasn't always there for home improvement projects. For this reason, contractors did all they could to keep their seasoned crews busy. *[Assembling a crew of people who know their work and work cohesively together takes time. Contractors do not like to lose this business momentum if it is avoidable.]* This being the case, contractors scrambled to go out and visit jobsites to drum up work. They would offer FREE quotes and often not take a full wage themselves, just to keep their workers employed. Times were tough 40 years ago. The process of offering FREE quotes became the norm as the recession dragged on. Even after the recession had ended, free quotes became the new expectation.

Economically, things have changed since the 1980's when it comes to construction. The economy rebounded significantly, but in this time period we are witnessing an all-time high when it comes to consumer debt. Realtors are not experiencing shoulder periods, and the banks are still lending money, but interest rates are rising during a time when consumers are already heavily leveraged. Time will tell what the next phase of the market will do, but the banks are still allowing people to extend themselves. In fact, the banks are willing to extend themselves so much, that they're willing to include additional money for homeowners to do further customizations to their home after they buy it.

Notwithstanding the times changing, somehow it is still an expectation that contractors should offer free quotes. Increasingly, contractors are opting out of the free quote expectation, but as with most things, change takes time. This reality is both interesting and perplexing to me. Three versus Free. These two words are so close together, yet a world apart.



What do FREE quotes cost?

Through association with other tradespeople and contractors over the years, the topic of the true cost of free quotes is never far away. I have spent many a breakfast meeting with other contractors, and with key people in my own company - discussing this topic at length.

There is a cost associated with preparing quotes for clients. The cost, or investment on behalf of the contractor, differs from project to project. Some quotes can be developed in minutes, while others take hours of time and research. Some quotes even involve input from other sub-contractors. In either case, most contractors don't speak of the true cost of providing free quotes. Sadly, most contractors do not take the time to figure out the true cost and subsequent impact on their business, so they just live with the haunting knowledge that this area of their business is one that they are losing money on, because they believe that *"that's just the way it is"*.



Back in 2014, I ran these numbers for my own business. With inflation, I'm certain this figure would be higher today. At that time, the criteria I used was the number of hours I invested that year processing free quotes, multiplied by my bill out rate. I calculated



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that I invested an average of \$15,000 of billable hours for FREE, and that was just for 2014. This didn't take into consideration the wear and tear on my truck, insurance, maintenance, or the fuel to get to the client's location and back. Most often my free time was spent during the evenings and weekends, at the client's home, freely sharing valuable insights and ideas (aka: consulting), taking lots of notes and pictures, and going home and either adding this information to the pile of other free quote requests I had at the time, or spending the remainder of that evening producing quotes for clients to review later. From a social and/or family life standpoint, the cost was significant. For the quotes I delivered, I would follow-up a few days later, only to learn for the first time that the client was waiting on two other quotes before making a decision.

Many quotes take hours to produce due to the fact that each project is unique. Quotes take considerable research when it comes to product selection, pricing, and availability. Pricing in particular, fluctuates monthly, if not weekly on some materials. Often, the quote requires consultation with sub-trades that would likely tackle one or more aspects of the project. All of this effort consumes time, which almost always goes unpaid.

There are software packages that do a fair bit of the work for the contractor. I've used several platforms over the years. For as much as I use my job software and estimating platforms, which costs thousands of dollars per year, they only get the task most of the way there. There is always a lot of contemplative thought and consideration when producing custom work. Due to the broad range of work that a home improvement contractor does, square foot, or linear foot, or per item pricing doesn't always get the job done. There are software packages that have complex pricing models, but there are always additional variables that need to be considered.

Exposing the flaws in the three quote system:

Before I point out the flaws in this system, I will say that I am still in favour of this system in some respects, but that a skilled contractor (or skilled tradesperson) is worth his or her bill out rate while they are investing time on your project.

Similarly, if you were asked to do \$15,000 of free work each year, you might find that it would get tiring after a while, especially once you learned that two of your competitors were asked to do the same amount of free work for the same project. You would



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notice the impact it would have on your lifestyle, and how it would erode your leisure time. Considering that, paying the contractor for their consulting time and other time invested on your project is a reasonable thing to do.



Let's assume you have no scope of work in place, and you asked three contractors to quote on your project. You will likely generate interest in your project, and you will even have three contractors do a site visit (or project assessment) within a very acceptable period of time. As an insight, the feedback I get from my clients is that after the site visits are finished, they will have one contractor who will follow-up within days with a quote. They will have another contractor who will drag his/her feet and be very late with submitting a quote. The third contractor will not submit a quote and not give a reason. This is generally disappointing to the client. How I read this scenario is that the first contractor is not busy and available for work. The second contractor is busy and trying to get quotes done as promptly as possible during non-revenue producing hours. The third contractor doesn't want to invest that amount of free time to quote on the project, but did not communicate this to the client. In any event, let's say you persist and are able to get three quotes for your project. The benefit of three sets of ideas, and three different approaches to the project, is that it broadens your view and



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understanding of the project. This is beneficial and generates more possibilities for the outcome of the project. The drawback is that you only get to choose ONE contractor to proceed with.

At this stage, you need to make a lot of follow-up calls, texts, and emails to all contractors in order to develop a better understanding of the different formats they're looking at, and confirm what is and what is not included, and if XYZ is not included, how much would that be? It's a process!

It is a big step for you to decide to move forward with one of the contractors. This contractor came with his or her own set of ideas, pricing, areas of expertise, time availability, and sub-trade selections. If the plan were to be locked down at this point, it could potentially be a very successful project. Keep in mind, it is possible that you are still attached to some of the great ideas of the other two contractors who you did not select. Here's where the situation becomes complex. Let's say you bring forward the amazing ideas of the other two contractors and ask the contractor you choose if they could execute on the other contractor's ideas as well as their own. Could these other great ideas be incorporated into the overall plan? On the surface, this doesn't seem like a big stretch, right? Well, in reality, you have just disadvantaged your contractor. Don't get me wrong, sometimes it is possible for one contractor to do a great job of another contractor's ideas, but it wasn't the contractor of choice who presented you with these ideas. To use a baseball reference, the contractor will attempt to knock it out of the park, but most often, they'll come up short of the vision the other contractor had when you fell in love with the idea. It is intangible, but there will be a slight difference in how you feel about the outcome. This being the case, your expectations need to be somewhat flexible. Most good contractors muddle through this request and do a reasonable job of it. A great contractor will see this for what it is, a Change Order, and treat it as such. I cover this topic a bit further on.

Where did the budget surplus go?

Almost always, project quotes include a buffer in case more time was invested in an established part of the project. For example, estimating 4 hours to pour concrete when it took 6 hours. Most quotes account for this margin of error. The quote could also include an amount for the administrative time the contractor will spend on your project.



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Unless they're identifying it as a contingency fund or are itemizing it separately, it is usually just included in the overall quote. If everything goes as expected on the project, the excess money is retained by the contractor. Very few contractors will deduct the surplus from their final invoice. Fundamentally, the quoting process is fashioned this way. You get a firm figure to work with, and the contractor has a specific budget to stay within, as long as the Scope of Work remains the same. Obviously, if unforeseen circumstances arise such as mould or rot, these issues would need to be addressed separately on a cost-plus or time and materials basis.



CHAPTER - 04

The Scope of Work

The scope of work is sometimes not considered by the client and often is a topic that is brought up by the contractor... that is if you're hiring a good contractor. If you're working with a fly by night contractor, this will generally not come up.

A scope of work is part of the success formula for every home improvement project. It takes the guess work out of what needs to be completed and it is a process that should not be overlooked. It is a template which becomes a tool that helps you compare quotes in an "apples to apples" or systematic fashion. It can contain a lot of information, or just the basic information needed to get the project completed.

My favourite version of a scope of work is basic and contains a **bulleted list** of each area of work that is to be completed. It should be SPECIFIC so



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that neither the contractor nor the client strays away from the scope of the project. It should contain enough information so that contractors submitting quotes can refer to the client's scope of work while they are putting a quote together. It should also indicate what materials and fixtures you will be providing so that they know if it is an item they will be supplying and installing, or just installing.

If either you or the contractor have a great idea that is outside of the scope of work, ask them to price it out separately from the primary scope of work. If they don't, then the purpose of a uniform scope of work will have been negated.

To the client, developing a good quality scope of work can be a daunting task. The good news is that YOU do not have to personally develop it. You can have one of your prospective contractors develop it for you, then pay them for their work so that the document belongs to you. The advantage of paying for the scope of work is that you are free to use it as you please.

If you will be operating from a scope of work, this needs to be completed before asking for quotes. Deliver the same scope of work to all contractors who will be quoting on your project.

Document Format and Pre-Screening Your Contractors:

Regarding the document format for your scope of work, I recommend outputting it as a PDF file. This way, there is less possibility of the document being altered by mistake by any of the contractors. Conversely, if you just type out a bulleted list in an email, it could get changed if they copy / paste the information to other application software. You can create yours in your favourite word processor and save it or export it as a PDF file. PDF documents are standard in the construction industry.

Once your scope of work is ready, then it is time to contact contractors. I would encourage you to not deliver your scope of work to too many contractors. It is recommended to have some pre-screening conversations on the telephone, and pick up to 3. Honestly, this next process is going to be time-consuming for both you and your contractor. And don't forget to value everyone's time. Remember to value your investment of time as well.

CHAPTER - 05

Change Orders

When the client and the contractor agree to the details of the work the contractor is to perform for the client, it is an agreement. This could be established as a written contract or service agreement if the situation warrants it, but it is an agreement nonetheless. Several things are hinged on this agreement, but the two most significant things are the work to be done, and the amount to be paid for the work.

A change order is a request by the client to alter the agreement of what is to be done on their project. Beyond that, there's no need for a drawn-out definition of a change order, but the importance of the change order is worth exploring. Change orders are not rare. In fact, some aspects of a project might not have been identified before the project started. A change order can be minor or significant. An example of a minor change order could be adding a second



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colour of paint in a bedroom so that there can be an accent colour in the room. It generally requires a little bit of extra time, additional paint, and painting sundries. Conversely, if a change order is significant, it can become a roadblock that prevents the project from moving forward until a solution is identified. Once this change order is agreed upon, the project can move forward. Here are two examples of significant change orders:

1. Let's say a customer wants to replace their ground level deck at the back of their house, and they want to increase the deck size somewhat. The demolition of the old deck goes smoothly, the footings for the new deck go as planned, that is until concrete is discovered under one of the outer footing locations. The assumption is that this is where part of an old structure was located. Perhaps it was the old sewage tank from before the house was connected to municipal services. Perhaps it was an old footing from an outbuilding. Further exploration identified that it was a fully equipped emergency shelter that was abandoned by a previous homeowner in the 60's. In either case, the change order, or change of plans in this case, needed to be ironed out before moving forward. Is this a true story? An experienced contractor would assure you that it is a true story.
2. Another example is a client wants to have a tile backsplash installed in their kitchen. They select a tile design but don't purchase it right away. Months later, the client wants to move forward, so goes to purchase the tile. At this time, it is discovered that the supplier of the tile is 18 tiles short of the amount needed for the project. Ordering more tiles of the same pattern would open up the possibility that the second batch could be from a different die lot number potentially resulting in the shade being off. Additionally, this order would involve an additional 6-week delivery time. In this case, choosing a different tile would be the safer way to proceed. The client opts to go with a different tile, but in this case, the new tile selection is intricate and would take 1/3 more time to install. This is a good case for a change order, as it adds additional installation time to the project. The change order in this case, involves adjusting the amount charged to install the tiles. It is agreed to and the project proceeds.

In residential construction, change orders don't have to be too official. They just need to be discussed by both parties and hopefully acknowledged in writing, even via text or email.

The Time & Materials Pricing Model

I recommend using the Scope of Work as the framework for the project (as with the 3-quote format), but then charge for the time and materials that go into the project. "Time & Materials" is my preferred pricing model as the contractor gets paid for the value of their work and the client gets what they pay for. The client doesn't have to worry about their contractor cutting corners on the project, therefore the quality of the job is often better. This is also tied back to the talent of the contractor and his or her team. Additionally, the client doesn't have to worry about being over-charged for the work being done. Keep in mind, firm quotes have necessary wiggle room built in.

One argument that supports the "quoted" versus the "time and materials" model, if we are to look



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at both methods objectively, is WHAT IF the contractor drags their feet on the project just to bill out more hours? The way a good contractor overcomes this concern is to DOCUMENT their daily progress. This is a practice I recommend so that the contractor can look back to the work that was accomplished each day. This serves to clarify and, in some cases, justify the hours they bill. I will expand on this a bit later, but contractors know that if they drag their feet, they are not going to receive referrals.

The finishing work is the final stage of the project. I bring this up because most people will be looking at the finished product, as they may not see the amount of work that went into the overall project. Over the years, I've noticed that the finishing looks better when there's less pressure on the contractor. It's nice to see a contractor taking the time to do the little extras.

In order that the client has a rough idea of what kind of budget to put together for their project, I recommend paying the contractor to price out each aspect of the project, and then budget an additional 25% for unforeseen circumstances. The financial difference between this approach and the quoted project approach, is that once the project completes, the client gets to keep what's left over from the extra budget. After all, doesn't it make more sense for the client to pay fair value for the work and then keep ALL of the budget that did not need to be spent?

The paragraph above is important, so let me state it differently. If the budget is \$1,000 and a recommended buffer of \$250 is added, if the project is completed on budget (\$1,000), would YOU want to retain that \$250, or would you want to give it to the contractor? Clearly, you'd have other places for that \$250 to go, right?



Asset Protection

Asset protection is a fancy name for looking out for a client's floors, countertops, furniture and other belongings. Ask yourself this - if the contractor arrives at your home with their drop sheets rolled up in a ball, or if you see them being shaken out on your front lawn with debris flying everywhere - does it not make you wonder where their drop sheets were last? At this point, you should ask them why they are bringing dirty drop sheets into your home. Starting off with clean drop sheets should be a standard practice.

Our policy is that before bringing any tools into your home, we put a freshly laundered drop sheet on the floor just inside the doorway and another one on the floor where the work is being done. We see this as a common courtesy. Additionally, we launder our drop sheets between projects, so that we're NOT transferring dust, pet dander, mould, etc. to the next client's home. Even on



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longer projects at the same location, we swap out the drop sheets for fresh ones on a weekly basis. The old ones go out on a Friday, and freshly cleaned drop sheets are put down on the next work day. This has always separated us from most handyman and renovation services in our trade area.

In the case of a lengthy renovation, it often makes sense to temporarily put RAM Board on the floor as it is often a more practical method of protecting floors. RAM Board is a thick cardboard that comes in 50' or 100' rolls. This is a great option when it is impractical for workers to remove their shoes each time they go in or out of the home.

If there will be sanding involved on a project, a good contractor should make a best effort to minimize the mess that could be made. If they think the project will become dusty, they should put painter's poly (plastic sheeting) over things in the immediate work area. In some situations, it would be good to use vapour barrier booths that protect the area from floor to ceiling. A good example of when a contractor would use a vapour barrier booth, is when they are doing a ceiling repair that involves sanding. These booths can be made to have zippered doors so that workers can enter and exit the booth without dismantling the booth. Additionally, dust extraction could be used on sanding equipment. It is almost impossible to prevent all of the dust from spreading during projects, but 90% of it can be prevented by using these simple yet effective methods.

On a project, when it is anticipated that there will be dust in the air, it is important to turn off forced air heating or air conditioning. Keep it off until the mess is cleaned up. Otherwise, dust will find its way into your cold air returns and get distributed throughout your home via the ducting system. "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" is a saying that certainly applies here. If you have in-floor or electric heat, this is still an issue, but to a lesser degree.

An overlooked area to protect is the garage. If there will be cutting, sanding, or painting done in your garage, it is important to cover things up with plastic or tarps so that items that are in storage do not get covered in sawdust, sanding dust or paint.

If a painting crew will be spray painting a fence or the home, there is a risk of paint overspray. This risk can be reduced by taking into consideration whether or not there is a breeze before spraying, or by tarping anything that might be at risk. Examples of



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things to protect are: the car, a flower bed, lawn ornaments, a walkway, a deck, or even a driveway that is concrete or paved up to the house and/or garage.

An example of how to minimize spray when spray painting a fence that has solid fence panels, such as cedar fence panels is as follows: If the entire panel and post is to be sprayed (with stain normally), there can be a lot of over spray when doing the top of the fence panels and the portion of the fence posts that are above the top of the fence panels. Most contractors will have someone positioned on the opposite side of the fence with a spray shield, and have them walk along at the same pace as the person spraying so that the over spray can be minimized. A better practice would be to use a brush and 4" roller to stain the top board of the fence and the part of the fence post that extends above the top of the fence.

Two reasons why this makes sense: First, if the top portion is to be done by hand, the need for a second person to walk along with a shield will have been eliminated; second is that there is much less over spray, so the project will consume considerably less stain. There is an exception to this method, however. If a fence has pickets instead of panels, there will be many gaps in the fence. In this case the contractor should have that second person with a shield on the other side.



Communication & Accountability

Communication:

When it comes to home improvement projects, effective communication is important for the client as well as the contractor. A clear understanding of the outcome should be arrived at, even before the project begins.

I will share some points that I gleaned from my personal construction career. I hope this knowledge will be of use to you. I have found over the years that when I was working on an aspect of a project that I could have completed in a number of ways, the client always appreciated it when I discussed the options with them so that they could have the final vote on the outcome. I have never had a client tell me they were not interested in providing input. Even if they were



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located in a different city at the time, I would call to discuss their options. Sometimes a decision could be made over the phone or via a quick video call.

Conversely, there were times that I left the project for the day feeling a good sense of accomplishment, only to arrive the next day to discover that the client had a change of heart about a previous decision. They would ask me to do it in a different way. Sometimes, I had to bill out a bit more time to make a change, while other times I would do it for free if it was a simple fix. In any event, once the changes were made, we both moved forward with the project.

Accountability:

Earlier I stated that there's an argument that supports the quoted versus the time and materials model, and mentioned the possibility of the contractor dragging their feet just to bill out more hours. There is a work-around for this that supports 'time and materials' billing. A good contractor will document their daily activities, even if it is in point form. Some will detail each day on their invoices, while others will keep a timesheet binder in case they need to refer back to it. Keeping accurate details of projects is a healthy habit to form, especially if the contractor is on different jobsites each day. It is convenient to have a memory jogger to refer to in order to determine what work was done each day and for whom. It is also a great reference tool when it comes time to invoice clients. This way, the client gets to see the progression of their project as it moves forward. This is the level of accountability the client deserves to see.

For the more tech savvy people, you may be aware that there are many project management software solutions available that contain different modules which facilitate contact management, scheduling, timesheet recording, inventory, and even invoicing. Believe me, I have tried at least six of them and have used them to varying degrees of success over the years. The level of technology that a contractor uses, should be based on their specific needs. Sometimes low tech is the way to go, while other times, a more robust solution can save a company time and money, especially if sizeable crews are involved.

Safety, Security & Trust

Safety:

In the Navy there is a saying that states “a clean ship is a safe ship, and a safe ship is a happy ship”. What this means is that if the ship, or in this case the jobsite, is left a mess, and you have to climb over things to avoid messes, it becomes a situation where it is consciously or sub-consciously unsafe, and sometimes unnerving. A person could possibly get injured while trying to get around untidy obstacles. For this reason, it is best to take care of messes periodically throughout the day. There are five separate stages of cleanup. There’s the cleanup that is done during a demolition phase of a project, like in a kitchen for example, where large amounts of materials such as old cupboards are brought out



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to be disposed of. Then there's the incidental cleanups throughout the day, followed by the end of day cleanup when tidying up gets done and tools get put away. Then there's the Friday routine (another Navy term), which is more thorough than the daily cleanup, as the drop sheets that were protecting the floor are taken offsite to be laundered, and as much evidence as possible of the construction work is put away so that the family can regain a sense of normal for the weekend. Finally, there's the post construction cleanup if this was included in the scope of work and project budget. This final stage of cleanup is generally conducted by a specialized cleaning crew that does a thorough job, so that the primary contractor and homeowner can give the project that final seal of approval.

Another aspect of safety pertains to the safety and well-being of co-workers. With some workers, it is fashionable to have earphones in their ears while they work. As much as it is appealing to listen to music while working, this can pose a safety risk, depending on the work environment. If a worker is on the ground, and a tool falls off of a scaffold or ladder, the ground worker could possibly not hear a heads-up warning, and be injured. Equally possible, is that if the crew working at heights gets into trouble, the worker on the ground might not hear a request for assistance. Other than the safety aspect of it, workers often do not hear effectively while wearing a headset. This becomes frustrating at times. A good policy is to not allow telephone and entertainment headsets, earbuds, earphones, etc. on the jobsite where there's multiple crew members working in the same area. There are exceptions, but generally speaking, work crews rely on one another to be safe. If the situation permits, a suitable alternative is to have a shared radio turned to a mutually agreed upon station, and sound level. In a residential setting where family members are present, it is more likely that no radio would be more appropriate.

There are other important aspects of safety that should not be overlooked, and encompass the WorkSafe requirements of wearing the proper PPE (personal protection equipment) for the job that is being done. If a person is working at heights, it is sensible and a requirement in most jurisdictions, to wear a safety harness, otherwise known as fall protection. A responsible contractor will ensure the crew are safe while they work. Three other examples are ear, eye, and lung protection. If a worker is chipping away at something in order to remove it, or using equipment such as a saw that generates sawdust or other particulate, or painting something with a strong smelling or toxic



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substance, it is prudent to wear safety glasses, ear protection and a dust mask or respirator for protection.

Security:

As the development of security technology progresses, the price of adopting it continues to lower. The capability of the smart phone, coupled with countless companies and individuals creating applications for use on mobile devices, has paved way to almost all service providers using wireless technology to engage and interact with their customers. With that, on an ongoing basis, people are being trained to be tech savvy, and are being encouraged to use smart phone technology for more and more aspects of their daily life. By simply checking an application on their smart phone, people are able to monitor what is happening in their home while they are away at work or even while they are elsewhere on vacation. There are many legitimate reasons for wanting to check on what is going on at home, such as confirming that a child got home safely from school, or checking in on an unpredictable pet.





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Trust:

People are curious by nature, and they are finding other uses for home security, such as being notified when packages arrive at the door, or for monitoring the babysitter. A family situation that is of great concern to people, is the care given to elderly parents or disabled people living in the home. The concern is that primary care givers want to trust people who they charge with the responsibility to care for those in need while the primary care giver is away. Increased trust leads to less stress overall.

Home Service Providers, not just contractors, are noticing the presence of cameras in the home and are therefore conducting themselves accordingly.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

A good contractor will tell every technician they hire that when they are working in someone's home, to conduct themselves as though they are working in their mother's home. This is a great way to give workers the proper perspective so that they are respecting the client's home and belongings, and keeping their conduct in check. Also, they should tell them to always assume they are on camera when they are in a customer's home, because sometimes they are.

Two Types of Clients

When doing renovations work, there can be many different types of clients or types of projects, but in the end, they generally fall into two specific categories. There are clients who ask - *when can you start?* And there are clients who ask - *when can you quote?*

A seasoned contractor's approach will be twofold. For the clients who ask - *when can you start?*, it is a matter of consulting the calendar and giving them a start date. Then, they can continue to plan the project with the client, select materials, and work out the details so that the project starts and ends with a well-developed plan. In this case, the research, administration, and actual project time are billable, but the homeowner gets the contractor's undivided attention and fair value for the work they receive. Regarding selecting



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materials, the contractor will have experience with a wide variety of building materials. They will be able to steer the client in the right direction when these decisions are being made. There is great value in this alone.

The second category of clients are those who ask - *when can you quote?* The seasoned contractor's response to this category of client takes longer, as they are generally asking for free consulting in advance of their decision-making process. A fair approach to this request is that the contractor will likely tell the client that he/she wants their project to be successful. To do this, there is usually some research and leg work that needs to be done before estimating (not quoting) the project cost. The reason for developing an estimate versus a quote is for the customer to establish a budget for the project. The contractor will tell the client that they would be happy to do this research, source materials, and outline everything that needs to be done. Then they can create the workflow or sequence in which things need to be completed for their project (aka: scope of work). The seasoned contractor will charge for their time, and this is abundantly fair. The contractor can even tell their clients that they are free to take this scope of work and share it with other contractors to see what prices come back. As the scope of work will have been paid for, the client is free to do with it what they want. If the contractor provides them with their first estimate at that time, they will request that the client not share this estimate with other contractors. The reason for this request is so that subsequent contractors don't take a small percentage off of the first estimate just to get the job. If this is done, it is **LIKELY** that they did not do adequate research and just fired a number back to get the project and hope that they can figure out the details later. Avoid this if possible! You want subsequent contractors to work off of an established scope of work and not another contractor's estimate. Once the client is happy with the estimates that they were able to obtain, they are in a position to compare apples to apples, because now all contractors are putting their figures to the same scope of work. The numbers will still have a bit of spread, but at least the client now has the confidence to choose the right contractor, and the right contractor is not always the cheapest one.

If you will notice, the process of putting clients into these two categories at the beginning stages, serves as a pre-qualification process for the contractor. It also lets the client know that they have this contractor's attention and that they are interested in doing the work. Finally, some clients are happy with the impression the first contractor left them with and decide to award them the project.

CHAPTER - 11

Should the Client Act as the General Contractor?

Should the client act as the general contractor is an age-old question, and one that is often debated. It often comes down to a cost/benefit analysis. There are plenty of homeowners who would be competent fulfilling this roll, but it is not for everyone. The general contractor, or GC position is more complex than getting materials to the jobsite and hiring a few sub-trades.

The trades ecosystem:

A general contractor is at the top of his or her own trades ecosystem, if we can use that comparison. It can take years to assemble a



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reliable team who work well together. The contractor is not going to bring people to your home to do work if they don't know the quality of that tradesperson's work and level of professionalism. To do so, would only make the contractor look bad. The various specialized tradespeople or members of this ecosystem become familiar with each other's work quality, expectations, and special considerations over time. In a perfect scenario, this results in a seamless workflow. Even this workflow can go wrong if one of the tradespeople gets stuck on a different jobsite and is unable to work when they were scheduled to work on your renovation. Fortunately, most times the work flow runs smoothly.

The Client / General Contractor:

It is understandable that homeowners want to act as their own General Contractor. They feel they will save money by doing so. It would be a safe assumption that they are seldom doing it because they have a passion to be a general contractor. They follow a logical process by making calls to find an electrician, a plumber, a painter, et cetera in hopes to assemble their own dream team. They might be able to accomplish this, but when a handful of tradespeople who are unfamiliar with each other are brought into a project together, there can be a lot of nuances. Most times these get sorted out, but if one major hiccup occurs, it can cost the project a lot of time and money.

When a contractor submits an estimate for a project, it is based on the assumption that the usual sub-trade relationships are in place, and the cooperation and respect these sub-trades have for each other will remain consistent. In fact, this ecosystem of tradespeople will know what each other's expectations and preferences are. It is a cohesive unit that works in the client's favour. By changing the talent combination, the homeowner can actually make the scheduling process and the hand off from one trade to the next go less smoothly. It is best to allow the primary contractor make these arrangements, as the goal for everyone involved is to have the project complete with as few schedule interruptions and uncertainties as possible.



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Tradespeople Warranty Only What They Supply:

Some homeowners like to do the materials shopping and deliveries, dump runs, and other logistical aspects of the project. When the homeowner purchases the exact fixtures they want for their renovation, they get what they visually like and can afford, but this unveils a different opportunity for complexity. Contractors generally will not warranty products they do not supply. They will install it for the homeowner, but they generally will not warranty it. Prime examples are anything to do with plumbing, electrical, and gas. To a lesser degree, things such as countertops, shower curtain rods, window coverings, flooring, unfamiliar brands of paint, et cetera. The contractor does not take this position to be mean or spiteful, it is just that contractors use what they use for good reasons. They seldom have issues when using products that they are familiar with. They will generally give the client some options, but they want to use consistently reliable materials. Remember, contractors don't like callbacks regarding issues that were avoidable.

Do You Speak the Language?

Construction industry descriptive words, terminology and trades knowledge are beneficial when talking about the project with tradespeople and suppliers.

While waiting in line at the wholesale supplier, it is interesting to observe how differently the counter staff interact with home owners compared to how they interact with someone who is a seasoned general contractor. The pace is different, the language is adjusted, and the need to confirm each aspect of the supply order is different. It is not a laughable experience by any means, and it is not to poke fun at homeowners wanting to be GC's. It is just that between counter staff and the GC, there is a level of familiarity and understanding that is taken for granted, which takes time to develop.

Perhaps a better example of this is when a small group of friends go out to a restaurant and order drinks and food. The server knows Alanna, because she goes to that restaurant almost every week. So, the server goes around the table and asks what people would like to drink. Some will have water, one will have a diet cola, and when it comes to Alanna's turn, the server asks if she'd like a caesar. The others in the group



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turn to look at Alanna, and the server comments that she almost always knows what Alanna wants. If we were to take this example a bit further, the server might ask Alanna if she'd like an order of nachos to share with the table. This is similar to the wholesale supplier / contractor relationship and ordering process.

Can I Save Money by Being My Own General Contractor?

Contractors generally get a slight discount from their sub-trades. This is for two reasons. First, the sub-trade appreciates that the contractor chose them to do the work, and it is work that they did not have to advertise for. Second, it is customary for the contractor to mark up the sub-trade's work by a reasonable amount, consistent with industry standards. A mark up of 10% to 20% is acceptable. When the homeowner calls the tradesperson directly, they pay the going rate, without the discount. In the end, there is no cost benefit to hiring your own tradespeople.

When it comes to purchasing materials, the contractor spends money consistently with their suppliers, which significantly contributes to the wholesale supplier's buying power. In exchange for this, the contractor often gets a discount from their wholesale suppliers. This is not always the case, but loyalty is rewarded where possible. Subsequently, the contractor may elect to mark up their materials by a standard amount. If the customer buys the materials directly, they don't have the buying power, and generally pay retail. When the contractor buys the material, often the discount they receive, compared to the markup they apply, ends up about the same.

I wouldn't want to dissuade a client from contributing to their own renovation. Often, the most appreciated help is with tasks that tend to pull the contractor away from more productive tasks, such as keeping the jobsite clean, making trips to the dump, and by picking up supplies that the contractor ordered (over the phone) from various suppliers.



CHAPTER - 12

Final Notes

I thought it would be good to end this book by suggesting that the first renovation is the hardest, even if all of the proper steps are followed. If you act on some of the tips in this book, you will have avoided some of the pitfalls of home improvements and look forward to your future projects.

It is my wish that you can identify and appreciate the different perspectives of the quoting process. Everyone's time is worth their fair wage!

I did not create this book with the intent to include the permitting process for doing a renovation. This process differs from one jurisdiction to the next. It is best to consult your contractor regarding building permits, inspections, and associated costs before you undertake any significant renovations work to your home.



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Staying Organized:

Try to start off organized, and don't let this get away on you. Keep track of the money you spend. Keep your purchase receipts and work invoices in a folder for ease of reference.

Create a binder of information for your home improvement. Keep track of who supplied you with what materials. Try to retain part of a box of flooring material, spare tile and grout, spare paint for touch-ups and future colour samples. Keep a sample of your baseboard, window trim, and door trim. Identify other items if you think you will need to refer to them in the future.

Keep the contact and contract data for suppliers and contractors for warranty and future work purposes. You might even consider referring them to your friends.

Keep track of the work stages of your project, so that you can paint a better picture of how long your next renovation should take to complete.

Try to time your project for when you are not expecting company in from out of town. Also consider school and work schedules. Allow yourself, and your contractor, enough time to enjoy the process.

As your renovation progresses, celebrate the milestones with friends and family.

Tradespeople are notorious for playing tricks on each other. If your contractor has a sense of humour, test it on occasion. For example, wait until they tear a wall down, frame in a door opening, or install trimwork in a specific room, then tell them that it was the wrong one! A good sense of humour fosters a widely appreciated esprit de corp.



Thank You

Finally, I'd like to express my gratitude to you for investing in and reading this book. Feel free to reach out to Service@YourLocalHandyman.com if you have questions or comments.

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