

Choosing a commercial, general contractor may be one of the biggest decisions you make in your life. After all, they are responsible for turning your business vision into a reality. A good contractor and ultimately a well designed building often determines the success of your venture. It is important to have a good working relationship and an ability to communicate with the contractor. Ideally, this will become a long term relationship for future business building needs.

A good contractor will orchestrate your project from inception to completion by selecting trustworthy subcontractors and keeping them on schedule, finding the right materials, guiding your design decisions with their experience, and staying mindful of your budget. They will also be transparent when it comes to where your money goes. Can they back up the costs with proof of materials, and labor?

The following guide will help you to choose the right contractor, one with whom you can develop the rapport necessary to succeed in your building project and ensure that all of your expectations are met.

Benefits of a Good Relationship

Besides creating a more pleasant experience during the building phase of your project, having a good relationship with your contractor extends well beyond the creation of the physical structure and into the success of your business. The general contractor and design team are consultants in delivering your building and ultimately the products and services to your customers or tenants. Having a "partner" in your contractor allows for a better payoff once the project is finished by impacting both your customers and your employees.

The market is constantly changing and many business owners and landlords are trying to build quickly. Time is often the difference between landing tenants for your building and them finding another space to rent. It can also delay income if you are the business owner. Trusting your general contractor breeds success in your project and your business as it allows decisions to be made quickly and with minimal cost increases. When your project takes longer than expected due to indecision or insecurity, it costs you money in lost sales or rental fees.

Business owners know that a happy employee makes for a good employee. However, did you know that a well designed building, free of environmental contaminants, with plenty of sunlight and fresh air can improve your employee's health and efficiency? The right design and build can save money in the long run by decreasing sick days and lost productivity, and can attract quality businesses if you are looking to rent the space.

Define Success

In order to determine *how* to succeed, and measure whether or not you have done so, it is important to first decide what "success" in your project means to you. This will vary depending on the space you are creating, but a clear idea of your end goal is important.

Generally, a project proposal can be broken down into three features: Time, Cost, and Quality. It is your job to rank those features in the order that they are most important to you. What is the level of service that you are looking for? While your contractor should always use quality materials, different finishes can cause the cost to climb. Likewise, overtime comes with a premium, so needing your project completed faster will raise your cost. If you've got more time to complete the project, you can expect a lower cost. This is entirely up to you and the needs of your business. Once you determine what you need versus what you want, create an outline of requirements and a "wish list" of things that would be nice, but aren't necessary. Bringing this when you interview contractors will allow them to create a more accurate proposal and will give you the ability to compare companies on the same criteria.

Your general contractor can be involved in the design from the very beginning or can pick up once the plans are finished. This is another important factor to decide on and discuss with your potential contractors so that you have a better comparison between companies. Most companies have an in house architect who can be involved at the design phase and can create the drawings needed to submit for permits. Your contractor can also do a Design Assist and quote a price to which he or she will then design back to.

Interviews

Once you've determined what you need to consider your project a success, the next step is researching and interviewing potential general contractors. It is imperative that you do your due diligence and find out as much as possible about your options.

When you sit down to interview a general contractor, make sure that you are meeting with the individuals who will actually be working on your project, not just representatives of the company. This ensures that a company doesn't just have an excellent "face", but that you get to know the people responsible for your satisfaction. The team will often include a Contractor, Architect, Mechanical engineer, Plumbing engineer, Electrical engineer

Here are a few questions to ask the team:

- 1) What is the background of the company? You want to make sure that this is a well established and financially sound company who is not likely to go out of business halfway through your project.
- 2) What is the team's experience with your specific industry? The right general contractor for your project will have expertise in building similar businesses and will be knowledgeable about market trends in your industry. Building office space? Medical space or retail shopping? Find out what projects they have completed that are comparable. Expertise in your industry will allow them to foresee issues before they arise, make more informed decisions, and create a better building for your needs.
- 3) Where have the majority of their projects taken place and does your location fit within that geographic area? This will allow your contractor to work with the trusted subcontractors that they hire on a regular basis.
- 4) What is the contractor's availability for the design team? If your design team can't reach your contractor when decisions need to be made, time can be lost and unnecessary costs may be accrued. A contractor who stays on top of the job is able to coordinate designs ahead of time, make decisions quickly, and save headaches and money.
- 5) What is their bonding capacity? Whether or not they can get a high bond capacity (basically insurance) speaks to their track record and history of responsibility. The higher their bond, the higher the confidence you can have that your project will be completed to your satisfaction. It also provides peace of mind if for some reason the company does go out of business, a third party will protect your interests.
- 6) What systems are in place to deal with problems that arise after the building is finished? Will you be able to go directly to your build team to correct issues or once they finish building, will you have to go through someone else (**and who would that be**) in order to get your problems fixed.
- 7) What do they expect from you as the client? It is important to set expectations for both parties early on in the relationship. Communication is possibly the most important aspect of a good working relationship and opening the lines early is key to satisfaction.

A good general contractor should understand and respect your brand and your vision and should be well aligned with your objectives.

Research

Some of this may be done prior to the interview process, and some once you have determined that you are comfortable with the general contractor and his or her team. During the interview, the company will put their best face forward and it is important to make sure that their track record stands up to their claims.

When you first begin shopping for a contractor, review each potential company's website. This will give you a short background of the company and explain the areas in which their expertise lies. You will also be able to view a list of their current and past projects, and any press that they have received. Keep in mind that the website is also designed by the company itself, and will present them in the best possible light.

Now is the time to do your due diligence. Check with the Better Business Bureau, (<http://www.bbb.org/southern-nevada/>) the State Registrar (**need web address**), research any law suits that may have been filed against them (although remember that there are two sides to every story, and your potential contractor may not have actually been at fault). Finally, check with OSHA (<http://dirweb.state.nv.us/OSHA/osha.htm>) to see if any injuries have been logged during their projects.

Whenever possible, talk to subcontractors that they frequently work with. Do they pay on time? Do they communicate well? Are they respectful of the subcontractors? This is one of the best ways to determine the caliber of professional with whom you want to work.

In order to gauge the level of quality you can expect, you will want to visit other projects that they have completed to see if the quality is on par with what you expect. By speaking to the owners of these buildings, you can determine if they deliver what the promise (projects completed on time, is the general contractor flexible? Do they respect your time and desires once they begin?)

Go with your Gut

After all the research and interviews are completed, there is one decision making factor that reigns supreme... your intuition. When you spoke to your potential contractor, did he or she make you feel comfortable? Did you like them as a person? You are going to be working very closely with them over the next few months

(possibly years)... does this thought scare you? Do you feel like you can communicate openly with them and broach uncomfortable subjects? Get to know your contractor. Does he or she seem to be passionate about your project and not just bidding for work? Do you feel like he or she understands your needs and hears what you have to say?

Choosing the right contractor now can save time, money, and headaches far into the future, so choose wisely.