

NORTHWEST

RENOVATION

February/March 2011

A Home Improvement Magazine

FREE



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How to Start and Complete a
Successful Remodeling Project



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How to Start and Complete a Successful Remodeling Project



By Chelly Wentworth

A home remodel is one of those things that can breed procrastination. Everyone wants to make the most of his or her home, but many, especially the uninitiated, put off making it happen. Perhaps, like a long-delayed trip to the dentist, this anxiety results from outdated perceptions and a lack of good information. But good things, like a bright, healthy smile, can result from overcoming fears and make us wonder why we waited so long to get started.

Step One: Do Your Homework

Prioritize your projects. Obviously, there will be some things you can no longer put off. But decide what you want most. If, for example, you are remodeling your bedroom, decide whether it's a larger closet, a sitting space, or a fireplace that you most want. Decide what you like and don't like about your current space. Make

lists, search the Internet, and rip out pages from magazines. If you're doing an exterior project, take photos of homes in the neighborhood. Then make an "idea file" out of that collection of materials. It will be enormously helpful in the design process.

You may want to talk to your realtor if you're planning to sell your home in the near future, so you know where your remodeling dollars will be best spent. Even if you're not selling soon, it's still helpful to look at a "cost versus value" report, like the one put out by *Remodeling* magazine (www.remodeling.hw.net/), to see how much return you might expect from your investment.

A "cost versus value" report is also essential in researching costs. It provides facts that counter the fiction promulgated by some DIY "reality" shows. Be realistic about what you're willing to invest in your home and the results you can expect from that cost. You can't expect a BMW on a

Honda budget, so adjust your budget and expectations accordingly.

Also, make room in your budget for "surprises." Even with reputable remodelers and the most thorough contracts, there may be unforeseen circumstances requiring additional work. (Dry rot and inferior framing, for instance, can be difficult to detect before demolition.) The savvy remodeling client will budget an additional 10 percent for such contingencies.

Once you've done your research on costs, consider how you are going to pay for the project. More than ever before, homeowners are paying cash for their projects, either by reallocating resources or saving up. Even in our current economic situation, many still finance through traditional methods or ask their contractor for advice on creative financing solutions. Contractors might also break a larger project down into smaller phases for a "pay as you go" approach.

Step Two: Decide on the Process

Besides a beautiful, functional result, you want a remodeling process that you're comfortable with. It's important to know that remodeling companies come in two distinct flavors: "design-bid-build" and "design-build."

The traditional design-bid-build route requires you to hire a designer or architect, then to get multiple bids from general contractors and hire the contractor independently. On the "pro" side, this course of action ensures that you'll get a professional design, pricing will be competitive, and you get to pick your contractor.

With the design-build process, you select and hire one company working as a team, and the only bidding involved is if you choose to get bids from more than one design-build firm. Design is less expensive than when contracted independently. Furthermore, because the design-build team works together from concept to completion, they can collaborate on workable design solutions that are within your budget.

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The design-build method offers other advantages. Since the designer works as a team member, you not only know your builder long before construction starts, but also have continuing design support throughout. Most importantly, since the design-build team has an established relationship and process, the transition and ongoing communication between design and construction should be seamless and surprises should be easily resolved.

Step Three: Find a Remodeler

Whichever route you go with a remodeler, you need to choose wisely. It's said that people spend more time shopping for a car than for a remodeler. Considering the cost, both financial and emotional, it's imperative to invest time in this step.

When getting bids, make sure they are as specific as possible and that you are comparing "apples to apples." As discussed previously, some change orders are unforeseen and necessary; however, change orders can also be part of a deceptive bidding practice. Some remodelers intentionally keep their bids low by pricing with low-cost materials, knowing that once construction begins, you will find them unacceptable and have little choice but to authorize and pay for upgrades. Ask about the estimating process to select a firm that will give you the most honest, accurate bid.

Get referrals from friends who have remodeled, go to the Internet, read local publications, and contact trade organizations (e.g., ORA, NARI, NKBA, and the HBA). Visit trade shows and seminars, and definitely check with construction contractors board in your state. Finally, interview the designer and contractor in person, preferably at their office, and then check the credentials and references they provide.

Step Four: Know What to Expect During Design

After you select your remodeling team, you'll meet with the designer. At the initial meeting, be prepared to discuss your budget, goals, likes, and dislikes. You

don't need to know how to achieve those goals or exactly what the finished space will look like — that's what the designer is for. However, if you have specific ideas — here's where that "idea file" comes in handy — communicate them so you get what you want.

Design-build firms will usually present a design agreement and ask for a retainer to develop the project. This will assure you a well-thought-out, detailed plan for your project. With a commitment to enter into a design agreement, the designer will make an appointment to come measure your space. Then she'll develop preliminary specifications, drawings, and an estimate.

After you've met and approved the initial concept, you and the designer will



The production manager checks in with the jobsite supervisor to make sure the project is going according to plan. During construction, the jobsite supervisor is typically your go-to person if you have questions.

go shopping for elements that will help solidify and coordinate the design. The designer will then review and revise drawings and specifications, and present them to you. Leading up to construction, she will walk through the jobsite with trade contractors to review the project. Finally, she will meet with you to review final drawings and specifications.

Step Five: Build

Before construction begins, you should sign a construction agreement with a

firm contract price. (Again, know what your contract includes; for example, is the cabinet pricing for custom or off-the-shelf units?) Subsequently, you should meet with the contractor, designer, and carpenters in a pre-start conference to discuss the process in detail. Make sure you get a formal schedule, showing the start and completion dates for the various construction phases, as well as payment due dates. Typically, contractors will bill you for a construction phase as it starts.

As construction is gearing up, you'll want to make sure your contractor has gotten the proper permits. Also, get to know the people on your job, especially the jobsite supervisor for your job. This is typically the go-to person for any questions you might have. Know the production manager, as this is the person you might need to turn to if you're in any way dissatisfied with the on-site supervisor.

The construction phase is necessarily disruptive to varying degrees, and the contractor should minimize that by ensuring good communication, daily cleanup, proper enclosure of the workspace, and adherence to the schedule. As the project nears completion, you and the contractor should create a "punch list" of final tasks and touch-ups. The project should be considered complete only when you and the contractor have done a final inspection of the job, ensuring the list has been completely addressed.

Finally, make sure to note the warranty expiration date, and ask how warranty issues are handled. Now that the dust has settled, enjoy your project. Doesn't that smile on your face make you glad you took that first step? ■

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