

PLANNING, PREPPING, AND GETTING IT DONE

is an important number to consider. After all, you don't have to wait until you're ready to move to enjoy new kitchen cabinets or a spa tub in the bathroom.

KEEP COLLECTING REMODELING IDEAS

With budget in hand, dream about what your remodeled space will look like. Have you been to a home improvement store and looked at fixtures, floor coverings, or appliances? Do you know what your style is? Many design experts suggest starting on Pinterest.

Use the Pinterest search engine to look for things like "farmhouse-style kitchens" or "master suite designs." This image-driven platform delivers photographs linked to websites that you collect and "Pin" to your own virtual bulletin board. Once you collect a few you like, study them for common themes or elements. They'll help you and your contractor work together to achieve the look of your dreams.

SET A DEADLINE

If you're working on a specific deadline, it's important to have this date in mind when interviewing contractors to make sure they can fit you in their schedule. "The contractor should ask when you want the job completed," says Gauldin, whose contracting company earned a 2020 Best of Service Award from Houzz. Even if you're not in a hurry today, set a deadline. It'll set the pace for the job and keep everything running smoothly.

When planning a remodeling project, remember there's an order to things. Maybe the install guy can have his part done within the month, but the plumber is six weeks out. Use a calendar and plot each stage of the job to make sure everything fits together.

STEP 2: DO YOUR RESEARCH AND GET ESTIMATES

Once you've put your dreams on paper, it's time to look for someone to make them come true. But before you start looking for your home remodeling soulmate, ask yourself which, if any, aspects of this job you can tackle yourself. According to NARI's 2019 Remodeling Impact Report, 12 percent of homeowners contributed some do-it-yourself (DIY) labor to their projects. If this

describes you, you'll want to find a contractor willing to work with and around a DIYer.

The report also showed that 36 percent did the project themselves, 35 percent hired a professional for the entire job, and 14 percent hired the labor but purchased the materials.

ASK FOR REFERRALS

Did your friend Janet recently remodel her kitchen? Ask her who did the job. What about your neighbor or co-worker? "Most of our leads come from previous customers," says Gauldin. If you can't find someone through people you know, check out the listings on places like HomeAdvisor or the NARI website.

CHECK REVIEWS AND CREDENTIALS

With a list of potential contractors, start your research. Read their websites and look for similar jobs in their portfolio of work. Read the testimonials. See if they're members of trade organizations like NARI or the National Association of Home Builders — proof they're invested in their profession, says Gauldin.

Find out if your contractor is licensed for the scope of your project and if they're insured. Gauldin recommends checking your state's licensing page online. There, he says, you can find out if they have the proper certifications and if they've ever been fined.

Use the information you uncovered to pare down your list to two or three contractors you'd like to interview.

REQUEST ESTIMATES

Contact two to three choices for estimates. "An estimate will require a site visit," says Gauldin, "which may or may not include subcontractors." They should take lots of photos and measurements and then send you a sketch to approve.

"It's the contractor's interpretation of what the homeowner wants," he says. Once you approve the sketch, he can bid the job. "It can take three to six weeks from first visit to quote in hand," Gauldin says.

ASK QUESTIONS

It's a scary proposition to invite a perfect stranger into