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# The New York Times

**Late Edition**  
New York: Today, morning snow showers, high 35. Tonight, breaking clouds, low 31. Tomorrow, mostly sunny, high 38, yesterday, high 35, low 28. Weather map appears on page C8

VOL. CL . . . No. 52,596

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NEW YORK, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2000

It is beyond the grasp of New York computer users

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Excerpts from...

## Decorators' Report Card; the Good, the Bad, the Truth

By CHRISTOPHER MASON



Andrew Garn for The New York Times

WHO RATES? Elizabeth Franklin decided it was time the decorating world had its own rating guide.

INTERIOR design is notorious for its divas and fexacting patrons. So it is no surprise that an ambitious new Zagat-like guide and website called *The Franklin Report* has come along to rate more than 1,100 of New York's home-service providers. It is also no surprise, given some of the alarming egos involved, that a tsunami of response greeted the reviews of architects, decorators, upholsterers and contractors when Elizabeth Franklin, the founder of the report, sent them draft copies in September.

"Our goal is to be helpful and to empower the consumer," said Ms. Franklin, 43, a former investment banker at James D. Wolfensohn Inc. and the first woman to be made a partner there, during lunch last week with her 14 researchers in attendance. The setting was the luxuriously appointed dining room-cum-boardroom of her Park Avenue triplex apartment.

Vendors in 27 categories—from air conditioning repair to window washing—have been reviewed for public scrutiny. *The Franklin Report* seeks and summarizes praise and complaints from clients, does spot checks if there is a divergence of opinion, and rates vendors from 1 to 5 for quality, cost and value. While some receive accolades like "highest quality, reasonable prices" (D&F Workroom Inc.), others are faced with "took his time" (Finesse Cleaning Service) or "did not return phone calls very quickly" (St. Charles Kitchens of New York Inc.).

The proud motto emblazoned on the cover of the plump, purple 386-page Franklin Report and on each page of its online counterpart, [www.franklinreport.com](http://www.franklinreport.com), reads "Et Veritas Liberabit Vos"—and the truth shall set you free. The question is, whose truth?

Ms Franklin politely refuses to tell, citing the firm's policy of protecting its sources' anonymity. But she claimed that each rating reflects a consensus derived from multiple interviews, and insisted that the credibility of each testimonial was carefully assessed and cross-referenced.

A daunting amount of research is key to their endeavors, Ms. Franklin said. "We're not going to let one crazy housewife change anyone's ratings," she said. During the summer, "I had this horrific reference report on a high-end New York decorator from a woman who had tears in her eyes telling me about a botched paint job." To do what she called "due diligence," Ms. Franklin went to inspect the offending walls, and found nothing wrong. She subsequently received a fax from the woman's husband,

praising the designer. "It turned out that the wife is a high-strung person who gets very emotional about the stress of redecorating," she said. "So we had to eliminate her testimonial."

In 1989, Ms. Franklin pretty much appointed herself as a judge of truth in decorating. At the time, she was a co-head of staffing for Lehman Brothers' mergers and acquisitions department. She recalled, "All I did all day was evaluate people, sitting them down to talk about their job performance, and simultaneously, I was in the middle of a major renovation of our apartment."

"I had one horrific experience with a very well regarded decorator who took \$50,000, then walked off the job halfway through," she said. "It became very obvious to me that there should be some sort of a guide to help people make informed choices."

### A new guide gives clients a chance to have the last word.

The online version of the report is designed for expanded business opportunities. For \$200 a year, Ms. Franklin plans to offer "portfolios," to encourage vendors to post photographs of their work and summaries of their design philosophies, with slick layouts. Even though she has not yet begun promoting the online portfolios, she said, 20 designers have already signed up.

"If a vendor is included in the book, it means that they were recommended by people we respect who thought highly of them," Ms. Franklin said diplomatically. "We're hoping that everyone will see it as a badge of honor to be included, because we're offering a lineup of the top vendors in the city."

Maybe so, but frustrations in the invariably maddening world of design are rarely one sided. A. Michael Krieger, a well established designer, who received a favorable review, noted that the dynamic between a client and decorator is often pure chemistry and little to do with talent.

"I have some clients who are a nightmare," Mr. Krieger said. "I'd like to have a chance to rate how dreadful they are, too."

The report, \$22.50, is published by Allgood Press. It is available at Lexington Gardens, Kate's Paperie and Sam Flax, or from the report's web site or at 866-990-9100. The group is expanding its reports to other metropolitan areas, beginning with Chicago.



Andrew Garn for The New York Times

The Franklin Report, which has just been issued to assess architects, decorators, upholsterers, contractors and others. (Think Zagat for the home.)