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HOME

The Zagats of Home Improvement

To get on Angie's List or the Franklin Report, home improvement businesses must satisfy the toughest critics – real people.

by Janet Eastman, Times Staff Writer

IN one terrible 10-day period recently, a leak damaged the walls and floors of Terry Snyder's Westside home. He found someone to install new flooring, but his favorite painter wasn't available to restore the walls. Then there was an electrical problem and his computer crashed. Who should he call?

Fortunately for Snyder, a teacher who is picky about who works on his home of 34 years, he found what he was looking for on <http://www.angieslist.com>, a website directory of home and garden services. The site lists 26,000 Southern California providers, from air-duct cleaners to wrought-iron fence installers, who have been recommended by clients, then evaluated by the company's staff.

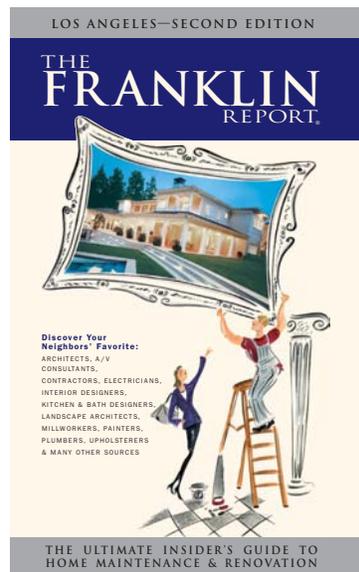
Angie's List, which debuted in Los Angeles last fall and in San Diego a year earlier, is part of a growing number of directories that bring the Zagat approach to the home improvement industry. These directories blend the contact information of a telephone book with frank consumer reviews. Businesses can not nominate themselves, pay to be included or advertise.

The Franklin Report, which released the second edition of its printed Los Angeles guidebook in October, is another review service group that relies strictly on customer referrals and not deep-pocket advertisers. The company publishes other editions in New York, Connecticut and Chicago.

These companies make money through subscriptions (Angie's List is \$5.95 a month) or selling their printed directories (Franklin Report's 396-page paperback is \$22.50). Vendors who have been recommended by clients, reviewed by Franklin Report researchers and included in the book can elect to pay a \$375 production fee to have their portfolio posted on

<http://www.franklinreport.com>.

Other home-service source books, especially those in which design showrooms and other businesses that work only with trade professionals pay to be included, have pretty pictures and contact information, but no critical reviews by clients. They also aren't readily available. The Franklin Report is sold at major bookstore chains and on Amazon.com. Anyone with Internet access can go to <http://www.angieslist.com>.



In the Franklin Report, under the small chapter on swimming pool construction and maintenance, a client wrote that Paul Benedetti, owner of Aquatic Technology Pool & Spa in Morgan Hill, is an expert on fiber optic lighting and "someone I would recommend if money was not an issue." The listing also includes number grades on quality, cost and value.

Cristina Dongo, who owns J.C. Upholstery with her husband, Jaime, thought about advertising in Architectural Digest to promote their framing, upholstery, slipcover and antique restoration work but says "an ad was \$10,000." Instead, she's getting non-stop work from referrals from interior designers, Hollywood celebrity clients and a free listing in the Franklin Report.

Their workshop on Pico Boulevard on the border of Beverly Hills draws from the upscale neighborhood and as far away as Santa Barbara and San Diego.

Client Sally Aminoff is a busy real estate agent and "frustrated interior decorator" who brought two old club chairs to the Dongsos' workshop. "Jaime looked them over and explained to me that these chairs are valuable," says Aminoff, who will wait six weeks for the chairs to be reupholstered in tomato-red cotton chintz with a chinoiserie print. She has friends in the design business but flips through directories such as the Franklin Report to find new sources.

The Franklin Report lists a range of services, including companies that design and build mansions and those that maintain small gardens.

Los Angeles architect Richard Landry is listed among other notables in the field, including Steven Ehrlich and Buzz Yudell.

Says Landry: "While most of our clients already know who we are before seeing the Franklin Report, it does serve to validate who we are and what we do. It is a way of reference checking. And I believe it is an honest book, where the ratings mean something. I am frequently called about subcontractors, which is probably how they arrive at the ratings.