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Finding a star service provider takes lots of work, but it's worth it. You're inviting strangers bearing large power tools and big personalities into your home, and your life. Starting the process with good communication is vital for a happy and successful outcome. You need to know as much about a service provider's capabilities as they need to know about your expectations.

Before contacting any service providers, first take stock of your project objectives, financial expectations and any exogenous limitations (co-op board work rules, landmark restrictions). You'll soon find yourself caught in the classic tug-of-war between quality, budget and schedule. Therefore, it is imperative to set priorities, and seek a service provider who will fully understand your point of view.

Word-of-mouth referrals are the most tried and true route to finding a reputable service provider

(and what makes The Franklin Report consumer reviews so valuable). Past clients should be a firm's strongest promoters. Make a short list (based on The Franklin Report and other recommendations) limited to those companies with the experience, creative sensibility and resources to execute your caliber project. You don't want to be stuck below the attention radar of a high flying architect, jump on board with a contractor who can't get off the ground, or dogfight your interior designer over clashing taste.

However, finding a home service soul mate goes well beyond the question of qualifications. Interviews allow you to determine if candidates are not only the right match for the job, but for you. While this may not apply to one-shot service calls, personality and chemistry is critical for more involved projects that require design decisions and complicated ongoing dialogues. Don't settle for anything less than a principal who expresses high interest in your project. The tone is set from the top. But you should also know who will be responsible for your job day-in and day-out. Potential candidates should be receptive to your ideas, offer cre-

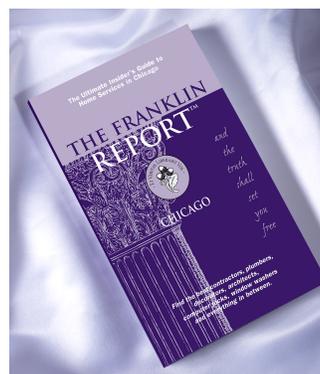
ative concepts of their own, be flexible, and yet be uncompromising in their standards of quality. Check out their work and, of course, chat with their clients.

Clients know best. Were the contract documents clear and meticulous? Did they hold weekly meetings with the project team? Did they keep clients informed and in the loop? How did they respond to the inevitable pitfalls? Did they follow-up on the dreaded punch list? Were they conscientious about a client's time, family, home and neighbors? These questions should qualify the service provider's ability to make budget and timeline. Lastly, after all the dust (and questions) have settled, nothing is more telling than knowing if these past clients would hire this professional again.

To make an informed decision, especially on larger projects, solicit three to five bids. Cost is dependent upon the quality of materials, the method of construction, the receiving environment, and the skill of the craftsman. Premium materials, sophisticated design, urban or renovation work, and prominent, popular service providers will unquestion-

ably translate into a bigger budget. Remember, though, a cost estimate is only as good as the information that supports it. Make sure various bids are compared on an "apples to apples" basis. Account for and document everything! If it's not spelled out in the contract, you'll become very familiar with the spelling of two words: change order.

In the end, be flexible. Hooking up with the right service provider will only get you so far. Only patience and a sense of humor can get you home.



ELIZABETH FRANKLIN'S RESOURCE GUIDE TO HOME SERVICES, THE FRANKLIN REPORT IS AVAILABLE IN AREABOOKSTORES.