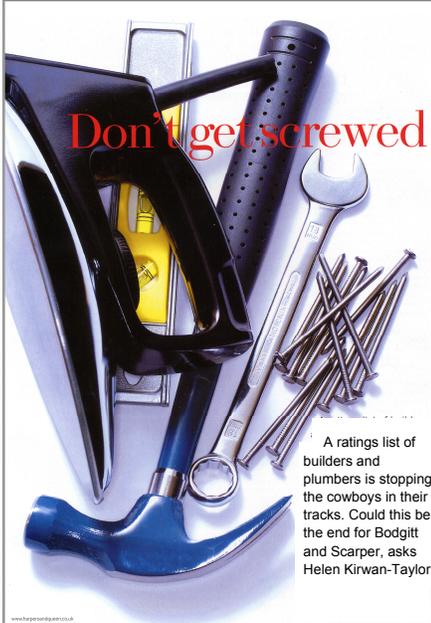




THE FRANKLIN REPORT

RECENT PRESS CLIP



A ratings list of builders and plumbers is stopping the cowboys in their tracks. Could this be the end for Bodgitt and Scarper, asks Helen Kirwan-Taylor

AT HOME

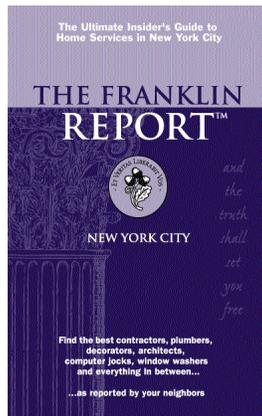
and virtually no comeback. 'It became very obvious to me that that there should be some sort of guide to help people make informed choices - that there should be some sort of jury' says Franklin.

She also knew that, in the world of decorating, plumbing, building, architecture and stonemasonry, you're only ever as good as your last job. It is a word-of-mouth industry where reputations can be made and destroyed as a result of just one client's comment. And Franklin's trump card was having a Filofax full of smart friends, all of whom had used a contractor at one time or other. So she made a list of everyone she knew, and asked her friends to do the same. Then she called each of these people individually and asked: 'Have you ever used a builder, a decorator or service-provider in one of these 27 categories? If so, how did they rate? And would you use them again?'

Soon, Franklin had the makings of a set of listings not unlike the Zagat restaurant guide. Within months, Franklin produced her first guide, The Franklin Report. The Insider's Guide to Home Services. It comprised over 1,100 listings and (anonymous) comments from clients such as (for an upholsterer): 'I wasn't sure what was going to take longer, the gestation of my baby or the arrival of my sofa.'

The Franklin Report is broken up into several sections, ranging from appliance repair and flooring to exterminators, designers and building contractors. Each chapter starts with a practical summary of what to expect when dealing with each type of supplier, questions that should be

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asked at a first meeting, and the agencies to contact should it all go wrong, followed by contractors' names and addresses. Next to each entry are a series of symbols and numbers: the ratings (from one to five) for quality, cost, value and client satisfaction. Suppliers with consistently bad reviews are taken out in updated editions, to make room for new recommendations. For a plumber or electrician, this is as near the Fortune 500 as you can get. So now, when a company needs to hire a workman, they say: 'Make sure he's in the Franklin Report'

The first New York City guide was published by Franklin herself (copies were dropped off in select places by her driver) in 2000 - with the words Et Veritas Liberabit Vos (And the truth shall set you free) embossed on the front. It became an instant bestseller. Such was the degree of interest that Franklin and her associates were then able to produce a guide to Chicago. Currently, the Los Angeles guide is in production, and, for the future, Franklin is also considering sorting the good from the bad in San Francisco, Palm Beach, Westchester County - and London.

Will it succeed here? 'It's hard to tell says Charlie Gordon Lennox. 'Other service-provider companies, such as Snap Deliver and Urban Fetch, didn't work, but I do think that people in this country have become more service-minded. The providers themselves are aware that there's much more competition! In terms of information, Gordon Lennox's Keyholding Company provides a similar service to the Franklin Report, except in this case, it also sends out the nominated tradesmen to do the work (at £55 per hour).

For a contractor to join Keyholding's lucrative books, he must provide an insurance document, a credit reference, and three letters from previous customers, on top of which he can also expect site inspections to check the quality of work carried out. Each new customer gets a questionnaire at the end of the job, of which 80 percent are actually completed. What's more, if the contractor fails to perform to the appropriate standard, he gets more than a bad rating - he doesn't get paid. 'I'm the third party in this instance, and the billing is through me: says Gordon Lennox, whose customers are, unsurprisingly, largely American.

But Manhattan is in a league of its own; Many of the architects and designers listed are beyond A-List. What The Franklin Report doesn't mention anywhere is availability. This is the glittering city and its wealthy suburbs we're talking about, a place where a plasterer might wear a Rolex and a plumber drive a Mercedes. Under The Franklin Guide's entry for designer Peter Marino, for example, rather than gushing client comments such as: 'Like eating out at a top restaurant, and 'As good as it gets, there should be a more sombre disclaimer: 'Sure, he'll take your job, if you're richer than Bill Gates and are prepared to beg - but don't count on it.'

For more information on The Franklin Report, visit www.franklinreport.com. The Keyholding Company (0800 064 4357).

How many times have you called out a plumber and, after paying them the equivalent of most people's weekly rent, turned on the shower to find that what was a leak has now turned into a full-scale flood? Call the 'National Plumbers Association' and lodge a formal complaint? As if. 'The only way to pursue a contractor is through a third party,' says Charlie Gordon Lennox of the London-based Keyholding Company, 'and that's usually the law.' So you might as well dig out the DIY books now, because getting satisfaction from the errant plumber could take a very long time.

Elizabeth Franklin was working at the investment bank James D Wolfensohn Inc in New York when she came to the same conclusion. As a partner and member of Wolfensohn's staffing committee, Franklin was responsible for deciding the juniors' bonus payments. These were awarded only if the employee in question had jumped all the necessary hurdles, and the committee carefully assessed all manager and peer reviews before finalising a figure.

While renovating her Park Avenue triplex, Franklin found, to her cost, that this rigorous money-for-quality rule was not applied in the same way to the contractors who repair and carry out work on New Yorkers' homes. The fancy interior decorator/architect she had hired to carry out a large-scale renovation of her flat left without finishing the job - taking \$20,000 of Franklins money in unearnt fees. 'There's generally a feeling that the people you employ are above accountability,' says Franklin, 'They just don't care.' The client, the person who is paying the bill, has no power