

How To Choose A Painting Contractor

Lessons for Selecting Commercial or Residential Painting Contractors

Steve was a new property manager. The owner of one of his facilities instructed him to find and hire a painting contractor for one of his older commercial properties. So Steve picked up the phone book and called a few companies asking for bids. Three of the six companies never called him back. From the three who provided bids, Steve simply selected the one with the lowest bid and asked them to get started right away.

That's when the nightmare began. On the appointed day, Steve made sure to ask tenant employees and their clients to park away from the building. This proved to be a minor logistical issue and inconvenience. But the painters didn't show up. Steve made several phone calls and left messages, but didn't receive a reply. A crew arrived the following day with no reason or excuse as to their tardiness. Already the project was a day behind schedule.

As the day progressed, Steve dropped by to check on their progress. The trim color was the wrong shade of green. When he spoke with the crew supervisor, he was met with simple shrugs and no solution. The crew kept painting. Steve called the contractor's main office, but again was met with only a voicemail message.

It was then that a loud crash alerted Steve that something was wrong. One of the workers had fallen from a second story ladder. He appeared ok, but complained about a sore back. It's ok, Steve thought, the painting contractor is licensed and insured.

But weeks later, Steve found out that "licensed and insured" didn't provide the reassurance he thought it did. The worker was suing the property owner and property management company. It turns out that the painting contractor had subcontracted the job to a crew which wasn't covered under his insurance policy.

When the invoice arrived for the job, the contractor added several hidden charges which weren't on the estimate, including a "cost overrun" of more than 25%. Steve was even being charged for the change in paint color for that green trim – even though it was the contractor's mistake!

And all this on top of the fact that the crew left the place a mess – paint scrapings, cigarette butts and fast food wrappers in and around the bushes and on the lawn. Additionally, Steve had received two complaints from female tenants about the inappropriate language used by the painters and how they played loud music on the job.

Steve put his head in his hands and wondered how he was going to handle it all. He wished he had learned how to choose a contractor – the right contractor – in the first place....

You can avoid Steve's problem by learning about the right way to choose a painting contractor – whether you are painting your house or a commercial building.

Begin by asking friends, neighbors, coworkers who they have used and trusted. Ask about their experiences. Then approach the process, not as if you are simply “buying paint”, but more like the process of hiring a critical employee.

7 Critical Questions to Ask Your Painting Contractor

People generally do business with people they like and trust. You should talk with your painting contractor prior to signing any agreement. Get to know them and their company. You should be comfortable with their demeanor and the demonstration of their professional ethics.

Remember, these questions apply whether you are repainting your home, the interior of an apartment, a commercial building, or any painting project. Be sure to ask these questions **BEFORE** you sign any contract or estimate or make any verbal agreement. (Some unscrupulous painters don't even use printed estimate forms or contracts!)



- 1. How firm is the initial estimate?** Some painting contractors may give you an estimate which does not stipulate how firm the price is. They may come back to you with additional charges and fees afterward. **Does your estimate include all materials and labor?** Be sure your estimate is firm and complete. A professional painting contractor should only provide a quote which includes all materials and all labor required for all steps and aspects of the project. **Does the estimate include repairs or remediation found during the process?** Painters will be seeing your building or your house up close and from angles you may have never noticed. They may find evidence of insects or rodents, mold or mildew, rotting wood, leaking seals, missing nails, cracks, holes and gaps, etc. Ask your painter if they fix these minor problems at no extra charge. Most professional painting contractors should repair cracks in drywall, gaps in wood siding, and seals around doors and windows. It should be obvious though, that painting contractors are not plumbers, electricians, roofers, or exterminators and should not attempt to work on these kinds of repairs. An experienced painting contractor, however, should be well-connected in the community of contractors and should be able to refer you to other professional contractors.
- 2. Will your crew arrive on time and be finished on time?** This is important for your convenience when painting your house, and it can be critical if operations are effected by a commercial painting project. Your first clue about the promptness and timeliness of your painting contractor is in the speed and courtesy they show in returning your phone call. Many amateur painting contractors arrive when it is convenient for them and take more time than expected. A professional contractor knows his or her schedule, the experience of the painting crew, and other considerations to provide a more accurate estimate regarding the timing of your project.

Of course, for exterior jobs, you will need to account for seasonal weather. Your painting contractor will stay in touch with you if a job schedule must be adjusted due to inclement conditions. Otherwise, the mark of a professional is that their crew arrives at the appointed time and finishes within the time estimate. **Will your crew move furniture, drape fixtures and carpeting, and mask off all windows and doors?** This is also an important aspect of professionalism. If a painter's overspray makes a mess of your bushes or windows, it may wind up costing you time and money to clean up afterward or replace damaged property. Be sure to work only with a professional painting contractor who will handle everything necessary for the thorough completion of your job.

- 3. Are you licensed, bonded, AND insured?** Being "licensed" simply means that the company is registered to do business in your state. There are no qualifications, no tests, no verifications; the business owner simply paid a few dollars for a registration and the company is listed in the state's list of businesses. "Bonding" means that the contractor has secured additional funds to cover you if something goes wrong: inadvertent damage, worker accidents, etc. This gives you instant access to funds without waiting for an insurance settlement. "Insured" means just that – the contractor carries an insurance policy to protect himself, but also to protect you from damage or accidents which happen on your property. **How much insurance coverage do you carry?** Currently in Washington State, the minimum insurance required of painting contractors is only \$300,000. In the case of serious injury or damage to your home or building, this simply is not enough. In general, you should seek out a contractor carrying at least a \$1 million dollar "umbrella policy". This covers you in case of property damage or personal injury. **Does Washington State industrial insurance cover all your employees?** Get this in writing. This should be on the main contract. If the painting contractor's employees are not covered and get hurt on your site, you are responsible.
- 4. Do you hire subcontractors? Will subcontractors be used for my project?** Many painting contractors hire subcontractors to do the actual work. In some cases, the people who paint your house may be inexperienced. **Are your subcontractors licensed, bonded, AND insured? Are all of your subcontractors' workers covered by your or their own insurance?** Again, the main contractor may be insured, but this may not cover the workers who are employed by a subcontractor. Be sure everyone who works on your project is insured by their respective employer. **If your contractor uses subcontractors, be sure to get a lien release form signed by any and all subcontractors who will be working on the project.** This is a critical issue when dealing with contractors who use subcontractors. If you pay the main contractor and that company in turn does not pay their subcontractors, those subcontractors could come to you for payment and even put a lien on the property. With a lien release, you are protected from such a scenario.
- 5. Are your painters trained?** It may seem that anyone who can swing a brush could be a painter. But you want to be sure to work only with painters who have been trained. Training should include safety procedures, working with all equipment, dealing with problem areas, customer service skills, etc. Working with trained professionals definitely makes a difference in getting a better quality job and higher satisfaction for you. **Will your painting crew behave in a professional manner?** The salesperson who sells the painter's services may be well dressed and well mannered. But some crews may show up only to turn on the loud music, shout or use

profanity on the job, and make a general mess of the place. Be sure you ask your painting contractor to address this important issue, whether you are painting your residence or a commercial building.

6. **Do you provide a pre- and post-project inspection?** Some painting contractors may try to get away with saving themselves time. They do a quick job, get your check and leave. Only after they are gone, do you realize that they missed a spot. Be sure to only work with a contractor who will walk around the home or building with you and talk with you about all aspects of the job, before work is started, during the process, and after it is completed. A professional painting contractor will be willing to “make it right” if you have any dissatisfaction with the finished job.
7. **What do you guarantee and for how long? Is your guarantee in writing?** Some painting companies say they offer a guarantee, but when pressed, they’ll admit that the guarantee is only the one offered by the paint manufacturer. If something fails, you may be able to get the paint replaced, but these contractors may still charge you for the labor to repaint your building or house. In Washington State, the minimum requirement for a guarantee is one year, but that may leave loopholes for your contractor. Be sure to hire a professional painting contractor who guarantees your satisfaction, including labor. If you can find a contractor who will guarantee your paint job for 2 years or more, including labor, even better. Lastly, a guarantee is only valid if your painter is still in business to provide warranty work. Ask your contractor, **How long has your company been in business?** and **How long do you expect to continue in this business?** To make sure you’re delighted with your paint job now and into the future, choose an experienced painting contractor so you can rest assured they’ll be around for the long run.

Keys to Ensuring Your Paint Job Will be Long-Lasting

Beyond these initial questions, there are other things to consider when hiring a painting contractor. One of the most important is the assurance that the job be done with high quality so that it will last a long time. The selection of a professional contractor is important in order to ensure they see their role as protecting your investment.

For exterior jobs, your painter should take time to wash and treat all walls for mildew. Again, this applies for both home and business applications. Mildew is a living spore and needs to be properly killed. The proper way to kill it is to treat with bleach after washing the house. A professional painting contractor will know how to apply mildewcide or bleach so that it does not cause problems for plants surrounding your building. If not properly killed mildew or mold will grow, even under or between layers of paint. After applying, it is important to allow your house or building dry off for 72 hours before painting.

Be sure your painting contractor is familiar with all the various building materials: wood siding, stucco, brick, aluminum. Each type of material requires a different process and/or type of paint. For example, in the Northwest, wood siding is produced from cedar, redwood, mahogany, plywood, Hardy plank, and LP. Your contractor must know the idiosyncrasies of each product.

All exposed wood should be primed. Hardy plank and LP need to be painted with 100% acrylic latex. Cedar, redwood, mahogany, and plywood can be stained or painted after proper prep work. For aluminum and other metals as well as concrete and stucco, all exposed areas should be primed unless otherwise recommended by the manufacturer of the material. If there are rust spots on the structure they should be sanded and covered with a rust inhibitor. All of these areas should be painted with 100% acrylic latex.

After painting, be sure to keep your structure free of dirt and mildew. After your house or building has been painted properly, wash it once a year. This can be accomplished by using a “garden sweep” hose attachment with bleach and water. This maintenance procedure is simple, but is very effective in the preserving your investment.

For interior painting projects, your contractor must make sure that all areas to be painted are clean and free of dirt. The areas most effected by this are kitchens and bathrooms. You want to be sure your painter cleans with a degreaser in these areas.

Your contractor should include all repairs throughout the area to be painted. This includes filling and/or taping cracks, nail holes, texturing, etc. A reputable company will walk through the area before painting ever begins to point out these areas for repair so you can discuss the full scope of the work. This way, you will know exactly what to expect before you sign an agreement.

A professional contractor will also be available to touch up both interior and exterior surfaces when necessary. Weather, animals or insects, furniture or fixtures, and even daily use may take their toll on your walls, inside and out. Your professional contractor will keep records of the paint used so he can match your paint as closely as possible, even years later after the effects of aging or fading. Using a professional contractor will ensure you get the most from your painting investment.

Two Techniques Your Professional Painting Contractor Must Use

Anyone can pick up a paint brush and call themselves a painter. In fact, a large number of so-called painting contractors are little more than a bunch of guys with brushes or spray guns. You’ll want to know that your painting project is in the hands of someone who uses these important techniques to ensure the highest quality service is provided.

- 1. Preparation.** Professional painting contractors spend a considerable part of the project preparing to paint your house or building. Preparation may include pressure washing, scraping, sanding, setting loose nails or screws, caulking where necessary, priming exposed wood, and mildew treatment. Especially in the Northwest and Puget Sound, be sure to ask for a painter with experience in treating mildew. Some less-than-scrupulous painters will actually paint directly over mildew-effected areas only to cause the problem to quickly reappear. Ask your painter regarding their technique for masking off areas which are not to be painted. Good, professional painters will do more than simply use tape to mask off the edges of windows and around doors. They will cover the entire surface of the window or door with plastic. Also, be sure your painter

uses overspray guards to prevent paint mist from landing on roofs, circulating into air vents, drifting onto plants and landscaping, etc.

- 2. Back-brushing and back-rolling.** Professional painting contractors will use a spray gun (remembering the overspray guards) to cover about a one- to two-meter square area. In external applications they will pull out a brush and manually “back brush” that area before spraying the next. If your painter only sprays and does not back brush, the paint stays on the surface and can not penetrate the surface and reach into any cracks. For interior painting, if your contractor sprays, be sure he “back rolls” the paint. Spraying causes overlap marks. If left alone, these marks will stand out after drying. Back-rolling ensures that the coat of paint is evenly distributed across the wall. Painting without back-brushing or back-rolling is like brushing your teeth and not flossing. Be sure your painting contractor completes the job by back brushing.



By selecting a painting contractor who uses these professional techniques for preparing and applying the paint, you’ll be more assured of getting a quality job you’ll be proud of for years to come.

How to Choose Paint Types and Colors

While you may want to talk with an interior decorator or other consultant, your professional painting contractor can be a terrific resource toward choosing the correct paint and colors for your interior or exterior, residential or commercial painting projects.

Choosing the proper paint for the proper areas? For those home interiors, a painting expert should consider your family and your lifestyle. For example, for rooms frequented by children and pets, your painting contractor should suggest a durable and scrubbable paint product with a flat or satin finish. Kitchens and bathrooms typically should be painted with semi-gloss enamel.

The same goes for commercial or office space. Rooms and hallways which accommodate a lot of “traffic” can cause walls to become dirty faster. These should also be painted with more resilient, longer-lasting products which are more easily cleaned.

Another consideration that a knowledgeable painting contractor would discuss is the tolerance for paint odors or chemical allergies. Whether the painting project is a baby’s bedroom or a hospital waiting room, there are paint products which are made specifically for these low or no odor and outgassing environments. Your professional painting contractor should be aware of these specialty products and suggest them when appropriate. He should also have connections to the paint manufacturers as a resource for other special needs.

Above all this, most people are concerned primarily with the color. Choosing the right color or

colors is not as hard as you might think. First, it's a matter of taste. Especially for interiors, the choice is a very personal one. What colors do you personally like? After all, it's your home or building. But while you may love your electric blue car, do you really want to be surrounded by such radiance in your living room? Consider the usage and mood you want the color to convey in each room. The kids playroom might be bright and colorful. The master bedroom more earthy. The meeting or boardroom would probably benefit from some "lightening up" – but it must fit the professional decorum at the same time.

Think about colors of furniture, carpeting, and adjoining rooms. It's usually best to create a plan where colors complement each other throughout a home or building. Pick up color swatches from the local paint store or from your painting contractor. If you are trying to match colors in a fabric or piece of furniture or even a company logo, have these available for your consultation.

If you plan on selling your home or building at some point, it is best to err on the side of plain, simple, lighter or pale colors. Earthy tones of off-whites, pale beige or eggshell, etc. will be attractive to a broader audience when it comes time to show it to prospective buyers. Exterior color schemes which are "classic" rather than "trendy" will give your property more "curb appeal". Tell your painting contractor your plans for the future so he or she can make the most relevant suggestions.

Similarly, exterior colors should fit your tastes, but now you also must consider the needs and tastes of the neighborhood. Drive around similar residential neighborhoods or commercial areas. Take along a camera to snap pictures of homes or buildings you like. Use these in discussion with your painting contractor.

Consider local neighborhood covenants or ordinances. Again, your professional painting contractor should be familiar enough with your area that he can help you.

The first step for selecting an exterior color scheme is to choose the main body color. Once the basic color is decided, it's much easier to find a complementary color for the trim. The trim should be at least three shades darker or lighter than the body. Some residential neighborhoods seem to promote extreme contrast and hue variations for trim colors compared to body colors. You may consider that more subtle combinations tend to make a home or building richer or more upscale in appearance.

It will be worth your time to talk with your professional painting contractor, the local paint store, and maybe even an interior/exterior decorator or designer to determine which color scheme works best for your room, your house, your office, or your store. After all, you spend a great deal of time indoors, living, working, and playing.

Overall, when in doubt, talk with your painting contractor, use your first instincts and once you've made a decision, enjoy it without regret. Make the effort and the investment to create a space you and others will enjoy for years to come.

We hope this report and the suggestions and tips in it will help you decide on the right painting contractor for your needs. Be sure to review the attached checklist, too. Both the report and the checklist are provided to you free by the painting experts at Northwest Quality Painting.

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Painting Contractor Selection Criteria Checklist

When you are ready to select a painting contractor, it is important to choose a company with the right mix of skills and experience. Be sure to select a company based on how well they fit your needs. Consider all they offer beyond just the price. Your home or office is, after all, where you live, work, and play. The contractor you select should understand the importance and magnitude of the investment you are making to beautify your space. Use the following checklist to decide which company is right for you.

Criteria	NW Quality Painting	Company B	Company C
• Professional manner, treating you with respect	✓		
• Firm, written estimates, no cost overruns or hidden fees	✓		
• Estimates include all materials and labor, no extras	✓		
• Will make minor repairs at no additional charge	✓		
• Written references and testimonials	✓		
• Connections to other trades and contractors	✓		
• Crews arrive on time and finish on time as promised	✓		
• Move furniture and fixtures, put it back on completion	✓		
• Stable, reliable, in business 10 years or more	✓		
• 3 year guarantee on labor, in addition to paint warranty	✓		
• Completely covers windows/doors not just masking tape	✓		
• Clean environment during and after project	✓		
• Use of overspray guards	✓		
• Licensed, bonded, AND insured	✓		
• Liability insurance coverage of \$1 million or more	✓		
• Carries WA State industrial insurance on employees	✓		
• Does not use subcontractors	✓		
• All crew members experienced and trained	✓		
• Crews well-mannered, clean cut, polite	✓		
• No music or profanity allowed on work sites	✓		
• Pre- AND post-project inspections and walk-throughs	✓		
• Pre-treats mildew/mold	✓		
• Familiar and experienced with wide variety of products	✓		
• Able to help in color selection	✓		
• Well-connected to paint manufacturer resources	✓		
• Utilizes back-brushing and back-rolling techniques	✓		