



How to Find and Hire a Great Pool Builder

PoolPricer.com

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Introduction

If you're reading this, you're probably at least *toying* with the idea of buying a new swimming pool. Unfortunately, as I often say on my website PoolPricer.com, there's very little advice that applies universally to *all* pool installations. Every situation is different, and that means prospective pool owners are often on their own when trying to navigate what is, without a doubt, the mother of all home improvement projects.

However, there is one thing just about everyone agrees on - you should hire the best possible pool builder for the job. The contractor you choose is the single biggest factor in the success of the project. It could quite literally mean the difference between owning your dream pool, or finding yourself at the center of a cautionary tale about a construction project gone awry.

Of course, recognizing the importance of a good pool builder is only the first step. The bigger challenge is actually *finding* one. This little book will help you do exactly that by compiling, in one place, the best advice I've been able to learn from both current pool owners and long-time pool professionals.

I won't lie and tell you that finding the perfect pool builder is always easy. However, I *can* promise that you won't regret the time and effort you put into this task if it results in a project completed on time, on budget, and to your satisfaction. I hope that reading and absorbing the information in this book will help you make the right decision - one that ultimately leads to an awesome new swimming pool.

Mat Jobe, PoolPricer.com

KNOWING WHAT TO LOOK FOR



The first thing you'll want to look for in a pool contractor is *experience*. And not just any old experience, but experience installing the type of pool you want. Of course, that means you have to *know* what you want (or at least have a strong idea).

Granted, the right pool professional can offer valuable advice and guide you toward a design that works for your home. Point is, you're not going to find the right pool professional unless you have at least some inkling of what you need. Here are some questions to consider:

What type of pool do I want - concrete, fiberglass, or vinyl?

Most pool builders specialize in one of these types, whether they admit it or not. If you ask their opinion, they may try to steer you toward their preferred pool type regardless of whether it makes sense for you. You *definitely* want to think about this ahead of time, and hire someone with a track record of installing the type of pool you want.

Am I looking for anything else that might require special expertise?

Besides the different types of pool liner materials, there are also various features and styles that tend to put a swimming pool in its own special category. One noteworthy example would be an "infinity edge" pool, which uses a special design to make one side of the pool seem to blend into the horizon. For anything out of the ordinary, you'll want assurances that the contractor you choose can actually pull it off.

How big is this project?

If all you want is a simple backyard pool, there are probably any number of competent pool builders in your area that can get the job done. You might consider newer builders without a lot of references (provided they have other things going for them). You might even be able to purchase a pool kit and hire a handyman to install it for you for much less money.

On the other hand, what if you want a large pool with fancy decking and state-of-the-art safety features? In this case, you can't risk putting the project into the hands of an unknown quantity. You need to hire the best general contractor you can afford.

Answering these questions is beyond the scope of this book. In fact, many books have been written on the subject of pool design. If you haven't given it much thought, I encourage you to read some of them.

FINDING LOCAL CONTRACTORS



A good rule of thumb is that you should get bids from three or more contractors, but where do you come up with the names? Pool companies are often obscure local businesses that do little or no advertising. The vast majority of people probably never think about them until they actually need one.

Unlike the normal situation where companies are in your face asking for your business, a hunt for pool builders requires a little detective work. Googling the options in your area is just the start of a long process. Here are some tools and techniques to jump start your search.

Websites

It goes without saying that you'll want to check out the websites of the pool builders you come across in your research. So why am I bothering to mention it here? Because there are a couple of important points to consider.

First, recognize what information is useful on the website. One key piece of information is whether the company specializes in one type of pool over another. Even if the website doesn't outright state that the builder is most experienced installing, say, fiberglass pools, it probably has an image gallery showing completed projects. Check out those pictures to see if the company has built pools like the one you're envisioning.

Second, it's equally important to recognize what information is *not* useful on the website. The main thing is to not get too wrapped up in the hype. A glitzy website does not equal a good pool builder. By the same token, you shouldn't read too much into a shabby or dated website. These are local businesses that don't always put a lot of effort into their web presence.

Overall, the pool company's website is just one data point in your search. Other factors are far more important.

Referrals

At the end of the day, no website or service can beat the information you get from talking to pool owners face-to-face. If you live in an area where swimming pools are commonplace, you probably already know someone who owns a really nice pool. Getting a recommendation (or non-recommendation) from them is ideal.

It also pays to be outgoing and approach people whose pool you may have admired from afar. This might be a neighbor you rarely talk to, a friend of a friend, or even someone whose pool you spotted on Google Earth (okay, that might be a little out of bounds). You might be surprised at how willing perfect strangers are to talk about their pool installation experience.

Note that checking pool builder references is something else entirely (I go into this in depth later in this book). That's important too, but you have to understand that those customers were cherry picked because the contractor knows they had a positive experience. It's not the same thing as getting a completely unvarnished opinion from someone.

Better Business Bureau

The Better Business Bureau keeps records of customer complaints and grades businesses on an A+ through F scale. You'll want to visit their website at some point in your pool builder search - whether it's to gather the names of contractors in your area, or to get some background on the ones you've already found.

Keep in mind that it's normal for companies to have one or more complaints registered with the BBB, especially if they've been around for a long time. That's why the rating system is helpful for providing some perspective. If a builder has complaints but still sports an A+ rating, that means the number of complaints is low compared the age of the business, or that the company has resolved the complaints.

Unfortunately, the BBB doesn't always give you a lot to go on, particularly when it comes to newer businesses. Still, there's nothing to lose by checking (except a few minutes of your time). If you have concerns about any of the complaints filed with the BBB, you can bring them up when you meet with the builder.

Angie's List

Angie's List is popular subscription service featuring customer reviews of local businesses, including contractors of all types. You might question why you should have to pay for access to customer reviews, which are offered elsewhere for free. The people behind Angie's List say that the subscription fee keeps the reviews honest - making it hard, or at least *expensive*, for companies to get phony reviews.

In any case, the subscription fee - which varies by area - is a drop in the bucket in comparison to the cost of pool installation. The real question is whether you will find enough reviews of pool contractors in your area on the site. If you live in an area where there aren't a lot of pools, this could be an issue.

HomeAdvisor

HomeAdvisor (formerly Service Magic) is a website that helps people find home improvement contractors in their area. You submit the job details, and HomeAdvisor matches it with up to four pre-screened contractors from its network. After looking over the reviews, you can request bids and have your information sent along.

One big advantage of HomeAdvisor is that it's free to use. It makes its money by selling "leads" (i.e. your information) to the contractors in its network.

On the downside, there's no guarantee that the best or cheapest pool builder in your area is part of HomeAdvisor's network. In fact, the contractors looking for work through HomeAdvisor are often those who haven't yet built up a reputation. Still, it's probably worth your while to at least check out the reviews.

Yelp

If you're like many people, you use Yelp to read reviews on restaurants, coffee shops, and other places. However, the hugely popular website/app has customer reviews on every type of business, including pool

companies. Since it costs nothing but a few minutes of your time, there's no reason not to check out the Yelp reviews of the pool builders in your area.

That said, it's best not to place too much importance on Yelp reviews. For one thing, there probably aren't a statistically significant number of them for any given pool builder. For another, these reviews are frequently manipulated - either by adding phony positive reviews or negotiating with customers to remove bad ones.

Other Services

There are many other contractor match services you can find online. There are even some that specialize in pool contractors. Unfortunately, using these services is often no better than Googling the names yourself - and may actually be *worse*.

What a lot of services don't tell you is that the contractors aren't screened for quality. Instead, they simply pay to be listed, or pay per lead. In other words, the service doesn't do anything for you that you can't just as easily do for yourself.

MEETING THE CONTRACTORS



Once you've put together a list of candidates, pick at least three of them to meet with. Try to schedule the meetings as close together as possible so you can make a more accurate side-by-side comparison. If the meetings are too far apart, the project could evolve and/or you could have trouble holding all the differences in mind.

By this time, you should have a good idea of the size, shape, and liner you want for your new pool. The contractor may ask for this info when you call.

Before the Meetings

When they visit your home, the pool builders may attempt to wow you with jargon or slick sales pitches. It's important to be armed with some basic knowledge that will allow you to ask probing questions and cut through the hype. In other words, do your homework.

You should have answered some core questions about your pool before you even began your search for pool builders. If you haven't already done so, now is a good time to delve a little more into the details of what you want. Chlorine pool or salt water? Automatic pool cover or not? Gas, electric, or solar pool heater? Spend some time researching the various possibilities and the merits of each.

The second part of your homework assignment is to take a closer look at the pool builders themselves. Do they have complaints filed with the

Better Business Bureau? Have they gotten any negative press recently (or even in the past)? You want to know about these things before you meet with the builders so you can give them a chance to explain.

What to Ask

If you've done your homework, you probably already have a list of questions to ask the builder. Here are some more:

1. How long has your business been around?
2. Who would be on-site overseeing the project? How long has he or she worked for you?
3. How do you typically communicate with your clients as the project proceeds?
4. When can you start, and can you give me a timeline for completion?
5. Understanding that there's different work involved in each stage of the project, what does a typical day on the job look like?
6. What sort of equipment will you be using for the job, and what's involved in getting it to where it needs to be?
7. Can you handle all permits and inspections?
8. What sort of payment schedule are we looking at? Will I have to pay for work ahead of time or only on completion?
9. Are you comfortable installing the features that are important to me?

The answers to many of these questions will probably come up naturally in the course of the conversation. Others you probably already know from your research. In any case, it helps to have a checklist and take notes so you can compare the different candidates on the same

criteria.

Check References

A meeting with a pool contractor is, quite literally, a job interview. And as with any job interview, the applicants should come prepared with references. If not, you should ask for them (provided that you haven't already eliminated the builder from consideration, that is). It's essential to check references before hiring any contractor - but *especially* on a project as large and expensive as swimming pool installation.

Obviously, the customers on the builder's reference list are likely to be happy with the work they did - otherwise, they wouldn't be on the list. However, that doesn't mean you can't tease out some candid opinions by asking detailed questions. One great place to start is with the list of questions you asked the pool builder during the "interview." Finding out how the builder's answers jive with the customer's not only gives you a reality check, but could reveal something about the builder's honesty.

Be sure to ask when the work was performed, and whom the customer credits for the successful installation. If the people who made that project a success are no longer around, then it only makes sense to take their glowing review with a grain of salt. Also, if the majority of the references are from older jobs, that could be an indication that they're struggling to find happy customers.

If you can manage it, it's highly recommended that you actually visit at least one or two of the references in person. People have different ideas of what constitutes a "great job," and seeing the completed pool for yourself is the only way to know if it meets *your* standards. It also gives

you some assurance that the references aren't outright *faked*.

Of course, the more you delve into a builder's work history, the more likely you are to discover issues. After all, nobody is perfect and no large-scale project goes perfectly. If you have concerns after checking references, bring them up with the builder and give them a chance to explain.

If you want even more advice on this subject, see my article [Looking at Inground Pool Builders? Check Those References!](#) on the Pool Pricer website.

MAKING THE DECISION



While the process of hiring a pool contractor can be exhausting, it's important to take as much time as you need to make the right decision. Be prepared to wait for *all* the offers to come in so you can make an accurate side-by-side comparison of the builders. Then, once you have all the information in hand, don't let yourself be rushed into a decision. There's a lot of money at stake here!

In some cases, one contractor may stand head-and-shoulders above the rest, making your decision easy. In others, you may have to do some more work to pick the best option from a group of builders offering different pros and cons.

Danger Signs

If you still have unanswered concerns about a builder at this point, it may be time to look elsewhere. Here are some signs that you may want to cross the name off your list:

- Urges you to make a quick decision
- Comes back with an unrealistically low offer
- Isn't friendly with you or your family
- Doesn't return your calls promptly (imagine how well they'll communicate after they have your business)
- Isn't forthcoming with all the information you ask for
- Has unresolved complaints filed with the Better Business Bureau
- Doesn't have solid references

Compare Apples to Apples

Unfortunately, there's no standard when it comes to pool bids. You may have a hard time comparing different offers for any of the following reasons:

- The builders have different methods of presenting the material
- You changed your mind about the design in between meetings with contractors
- You're missing pieces of information (for whatever reason)

To get a clear comparison, you may have to call one or more builders back to get them to provide more information and possibly amend their bids.

Negotiation

Another reason to contact a builder is to negotiate over their offer. It's not a given that you'll get them to lower their price, but haggling *can* work in some situations.

The most common tactic is to ask a builder to match a competing bid. This is common, and no experienced pool builder should take offense. However, they will likely question whether you're making an apples-to-apples comparison (see the previous section). If they're convinced the other offer is legit, they may agree to match or at least make their offer more competitive.

Pool builders are more likely to submit to haggling when business is

slow. For many pool companies trying to stay afloat during a tough economy, that's been *all the time* lately. But regardless of how the economy as a whole is doing, the best time of year to negotiate is in Fall or Winter when there are fewer people looking to install pools. For more information, see my article [Should You Wait for Inground Pool Prices to Go Down?](#) on the Pool Pricer website.

Cost vs. Quality

Maybe you'll get lucky and your favorite pool builder will also come in with the lowest offer. Unfortunately, in most cases, this doesn't happen. The old saying "you get what you pay for" applies here. Builders with top-notch reputations can charge more because they're in high demand.

The standard advice is to hire the best pool contractor you can afford. Given how much money you're spending and the skill required to do the job, it's hard to argue with that.

Make Your Choice (or Not)

Once you have all the information in front of you, you might find yourself in any one of the following situations:

One standout builder offers the best (or nearly the best) price. This makes your decision easy - accept the builder's offer before they change their mind.

One standout builder is more expensive than the others. Try to get that builder to match one of the other offers. If they refuse, it's up to you

to decide whether one of the other builders is “good enough.”

Two or more builders are equally good (more or less). In this case, you should generally go with the lower offer. If there’s an even *lower* offer in play, you can try to get the builder to match that. However, that might be pushing it.

You’re not thrilled with any of the builders. Simply put, if you’re not confident that any of the contractors you’ve talked with can do the job, it’s time to go back to the drawing board. It’s better to have no pool at all than a botched project that costs you thousands of dollars.

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