**Marketing and Business Success for Contractors**

**How to generate a steady pipeline of profitable leads**

**And get really, really rich as a general contractor**

by Nick Gromicko

For all the diversity among contractors -- as defined by age, education, cultural background, work history, current experience, hometown, family makeup, income level, and even work ethic, there are some basic qualities that most of us have in common.

We share the hallmarks of the classic entrepreneur.

We prefer to work for ourselves and be our own bosses. We appreciate the challenges that confront our expertise on the job. We take pride in the fact that if we don't have the answer at hand, we are, at the very least, resourceful enough to find it. We make the regular commitment to expand our reach by seeking out the advice and fellowship of our colleagues. We are always learning. We exert the discipline required to increase our education. And we welcome the greater tests ahead so that we can exercise our latest knowledge. For all our varying degrees of perspective, we are a community. Providing for our families, taking pride in our work, and making a daily investment in ourselves and in our clients, and enjoying the subsequent rewards of our labor are what form the foundation of our working lives. Can there be a greater ambition?

Success, then, seems already threaded through our business. It may be modest in terms of finances. But those rewards are available, too. There's more to our workmanship and earning potential as contractors than being a reliable expert on the job. Our name is always working for us (or against us!) even off the job, and that's where many contractors seem to give short shrift to the regular care and feeding of their contracting enterprises. Treating this dual aspect of entrepreneurialism with anything less than equal effort will inevitably drive your business under as surely as making a habit of performing haphazard work.

Marketing is often seen as a chore—'the work that you have to do when you’re not working’—and the less-than-enthusiastic result barely goes beyond a sign on the truck, a box of business cards, and a list of contacts. But our success depends on marketing not just our services, but also ourselves. Our credibility is our true calling card, and it’s important to get our reputation out there so that it’s as obvious as that sign on the truck.  It’s our first and most important marketing tool because without it, we are nothing.

The good news is: Just as there are logical ways to perform a construction project, there are equally logical and common-sense marketing tips and techniques that will put us on a trajectory to a greater level of achievement and expectation in our contracting businesses. We have to approach marketing as deliberately as we do our training, education, and even our construction projects themselves.  Pinning our hopes on random jobs each day is no way to build a business. And for as many contractors as may populate the town we live in, we’re not so much in competition with them (or each other) as with our own limitations. Our unwillingness to market ourselves is an unacceptable obstacle that puts a fatal limit on what we can become. Overcome that obstacle, and the competition won’t matter.

These success tips are the culmination of years of training, education, experimentation, argument, failure, and breakthrough—all the building blocks of success. In them, you’ll find dozens of straightforward strategies that will have you nodding, perhaps disbelieving, but, ultimately, becoming seriously motivated—perhaps for the first time in a long time—to move up to the next level in your career as a contractor.

To succeed at anything, be it landing on the moon or building a successful contracting business, you have to do many things correctly. Always work on building your business. If you are not on jobsite... be marketing your business, learning more, and improving your services. Remember, if you are a good contractor, you have a moral obligation to let as many people as possible know about and benefit from your good work.

Success starts with defining the mission. And that is where we begin.

**Mission Statement**

Every contracting company should have a mission statement.  Mission statements are not just for big corporations or charitable organizations or political parties.  Even your one-man contracting company should have one.  A mission statement helps define what a company is and what it offers, and it clarifies the company’s goals to keep it on the path of service and success.

A good commercial mission statement spells out not just the purpose, but also the priorities of the company, which, obviously, go beyond “I’ve put years into my training and education, and I need to support my family”—that part is understood.  It also explains what you esteem, and how you intend to achieve your business goals of serving your clients, based on your values and priorities.

Sample Mission Statement:

*[Your Company]’s mission is to provide the highest-quality workmanship possible.  We succeed at this because of the integrity of our subcontractors and staff, our commitment to a work ethic, and our passion for staying current with the newest innovations of our industry... with consideration for the environment.*

*[Your Company] is a general contracting business incorporated in [State or Province] in [Year] by [Principals]. Both bring years of experience to bear in residential and light commercial building and high-end renovations/additions.  Currently, the company is involved in custom whole house renovation and remodels, in addition to new home construction and commercial projects.*

*Typical projects are structured with one of the principals as the primary project manager.  A working supervisor / foreman is on the job from start to finish, and is responsible for the implementation of the design.*

*We've worked with our sub-contactors for years and have relationships built on trust and performance. Our carpenters and laborers are employees who have been chosen based on ability and craftsmanship as well as their personal qualities and values.  We feel having our own employees provides us with more direct control over the direction and nature of the construction process.*

*We believe our pride and personal involvement in the work we perform results in superior quality and service.  This attitude is also directly reflected in our employees’ level of responsibility, professionalism and competency.*

Basically, a mission statement should state:

1. what you do;
2. how you do it;
3. why you do it;
4. who you do it for; and
5. how you succeed at it each day.

Don’t let a blank screen or piece of paper intimidate you; it doesn’t have to be Shakespeare, but writing down these points is a great exercise for crystalizing why you’re doing what you’re doing and how you’re doing it.  It also may help you decide whether you need to change any of it.  Your mission statement should guide your company’s actions and move you forward every day.

A good mission statement isn’t just an excellent marketing component; it helps clarify for you (and your employees, if you have any) exactly what your goals are each and every day.  It’s easy to lose sight of why you became a contractor when you’re booked solid and rushing from one appointment to the next.  Sometimes, providing excellent customer service may be done more from memory than passion.

Display your mission statement in a prominent place; as a written statement placed where you can see it every day such as on your office wall. Reading your mission statement regularly is sort of like a coach giving his team a pep talk; you may have heard it a hundred times, but it helps to reinforce just why you’re doing what you’re doing, and that’s great for personal morale, as well as for expanding your vision for achieving your business goals.

Ask yourself exactly what you do to help improve your business on a regular basis, and write those things down.  Do you belong to the International Association of Professional Contractors? Do you take Continuing Education courses, attend chapter meetings and special events? Belonging to an association and attending industry event will help you stay current with:

* changes in codes and standards
* new developments in building products and practices
* safety training
* marketing and business success

By sharing ideas with other contractors you expand your pool of ideas and learn from the mistakes of others.

Do you get customer feedback that tells you whether you’re on the right track—the one that you’ve set for yourself?  Your mission statement is what you tell the world you are, but it’s also important to find out whether the world agrees with you!

Once you’ve got these points written down on paper, consider hanging it on your wall so that you can see it every day.  If you’re not happy with it, hang it up anyway and tweak it as you go.  Once you’re satisfied with it, have it added to your brochure.  A client will value someone who knows who he is and what his goals are, and how he achieves it.  Putting that into words can make a confident and powerful statement that guides your company on a trajectory of success.

**Forms of Business Ownership**

One of the first decisions that you will have to make as a contracting business owner is how the company should be structured.  This decision will have long-term implications, so consult with an accountant and attorney to help you select the form of ownership that is right for you.  In making a choice, you will want to take into account the following:

* your vision regarding the size and nature of your inspection business;
* the level of control you wish to have;
* the complexity of structure you are willing to deal with;
* the contracting business's vulnerability to lawsuits;
* tax implications of the different ownership structures;
* expected profit (or loss) of the business;
* whether or not you need to re-invest earnings into the business; and
* your need to take cash out of the business for yourself.

**Sole Proprietorships**

The vast majority of inspection businesses start out as sole proprietorships.  One person owns these firms, usually the contractor who has day-to-day responsibility for running the business.  Sole proprietors own all the assets of the business and the profits generated by it.  They also assume complete responsibility for its liabilities and debts.  In the eyes of the law and the public, the contractor and the business are one and the same.

Advantages of a Sole Proprietorship:

1. It is the easiest and least expensive form of ownership to organize.
2. Sole proprietors are in complete control and, within the dictates of the law, may make decisions as they see fit.
3. Sole proprietors receive all income generated by the business to keep or re-invest.
4. Profits from the business flow through directly to the owner's personal tax return.
5. The business is easy to dissolve, if desired.

Disadvantages of a Sole Proprietorship:

1. Sole proprietors have unlimited liability and are legally responsible for all debts against the business. Their business and personal assets are at risk.
2. Owners may be at a disadvantage in raising funds and are often limited to using funds from personal savings or consumer loans.
3. Owners may have a hard time attracting high-caliber employees or additional inspectors, or those who are motivated by the opportunity to own a part of the business.
4. Some traditional employee benefits, such as owner's medical insurance premiums, are not directly deductible from business income (and only partially deductible as an adjustment to income).

**Partnerships**

In a partnership, two or more people share ownership of a single business.  Like proprietorships, the law does not distinguish between the business and its owners.  The partners should have a buy-sell agreement that sets forth how decisions will be made, how profits will be shared, how disputes will be resolved, how future inspectors will be admitted to the partnership, how partners can be bought out, and what steps will be taken to dissolve the partnership when needed.  While it is hard to think about a "break-up" when the business is just getting started, many partnerships split up at times of crisis, and unless there is a defined process, there will be even greater problems.  Partners must also decide up front how much time and capital each will contribute, etc.

Advantages of a Partnership:

* Partnerships are relatively easy to establish; however, time should be invested in developing the partnership agreement.
* With more than one owner, the ability to raise funds may be increased.
* The profits from the business flow directly through to the partners' personal tax returns.
* Prospective inspectors may be attracted to the business if offered the incentive to become a partner.
* The business usually will benefit from partners who have complementary skills.

Disadvantages of a Partnership:

* Partners are jointly and individually liable for the actions of the other partners.
* Profits must be shared with others.
* Since decisions are shared, disagreements can occur.
* Some employee benefits are not deductible from business income on tax returns.
* The partnership may have a limited life; it may end upon the withdrawal or death of a partner.

Types of partnerships that should be considered:

* General Partnership: Partners divide responsibility for management and liability, as well as the shares of profit and loss, according to their internal agreement.  Equal shares are assumed unless there is a written agreement that states differently.
* Limited Partnership and Partnership with Limited Liability: "Limited" means that most of the partners have limited liability (to the extent of their investment), as well as limited input regarding management decisions, which generally encourages investors for short-term projects or for investing in capital assets.  This form of ownership is not often used for operating retail or service businesses.  Forming a limited partnership is more complex and formal than a general partnership.
* Joint Venture: This type is similar to a general partnership, but is clearly for a limited period of time or a single project.  If the partners in a joint venture repeat the activity, they will be recognized as an ongoing partnership, and will have to file as such and distribute accumulated partnership assets upon dissolution of the entity.

**Corporations**

A corporation, chartered by the state in which it is headquartered, is considered by law to be a unique entity, separate and apart from those who own it.  A corporation can be taxed; it can be sued; it can enter into contractual agreements.  The owners of a corporation are its shareholders.  The shareholders elect a board of directors to oversee the major policies and decisions.  The corporation has a life of its own and does not dissolve when ownership changes.

Advantages of a Corporation:

* Shareholders have limited liability for the corporation's debts and judgments against the corporation.
* Generally, shareholders can only be held accountable for their investment in stock of the company. (Note that officers can be held personally liable for their actions, such as the failure to withhold and pay employment taxes.)
* Corporations can raise additional funds through the sale of stock.
* A corporation may deduct the cost of benefits it provides to officers and employees.
* Can elect "S" corporation status if certain requirements are met.  This election enables the company to be taxed similarly to a partnership.
* It is easier for shareholders to sell their inspection business when they want to retire.

Disadvantages of a Corporation:

* The process of incorporation requires more time and money than other forms of organization.
* Corporations are monitored by federal, state and some local agencies, and may have more paperwork to fill out in order to comply with regulations.
* Incorporating may result in higher overall taxes.  Dividends paid to shareholders are not deductible form business income; thus, this income can be taxed twice.
* Potential loss of control.

**Subchapter S Corporations**

A tax election only, this enables the shareholder to treat the earnings and profits as distributions and have them pass through directly to their personal tax return.  The catch here is that the shareholder, if working for the company and if there is a profit, must pay him/herself wages and it must meet standards of "reasonable compensation."  This can vary by geographical region as well as occupation, but the basic rule is to pay yourself what you would have to pay someone to do your job, as long as there is enough profit.  If you do not do this, the IRS can re-classify all of the earnings and profit as wages, and you will be liable for all of the payroll taxes on the total amount.

**Limited Liability Company (LLC)**

The LLC is a relatively new type of hybrid business structure that is now permissible in most states.  It is designed to provide the limited liability features of a corporation, and the tax efficiencies and operational flexibility of a partnership.  Formation is more complex and formal than that of a general partnership.  The owners are members, and the duration of the LLC is usually determined when the organization papers are filed.  The time limit can be continued, if desired, by a vote of the members at the time of expiration.  LLCs may not have more than two of the four characteristics that define corporations: limited liability to the extent of assets; continuity of life; centralization of management; and free transferability of ownership interests.

In summary, deciding the form of ownership that best suits your contracting business should be given careful consideration.  Use your key advisors to assist you in the process.

**Code of Ethics**

Every contractor should have his own Code of Ethics. Consumers look for licensing in their contractors, but remember that licensing is just a minimum requirement. What will separate you from your competitors is your customer service, and part of that is spelling out who you are. A code of ethics is similar to a mission statement in that it articulates and crystallizes who you are as a business person based on the standards you embrace. But it focuses more on your duty to your clients and to your industry. Regardless of whether your state licensing authority and any associations you have membership in have their own code of ethics that binds you, your own code of ethics, posted on your website (and, optionally, in any marketing materials), is a declaration of self-accountability that you share with the people who are deciding whether to hire you.

Below are some suggestions for categories and items you can consider and adapt in creating your own business Code of Ethics. You can make your Code as brief or as elaborate as you want, but make it easily readable and readily understandable. Avoid being redundant; opt for brevity. Format it so that it’s user-friendly. Finally, incorporate items that describe what you’re committed to doing, including the standards of behavior and business practices that you would expect of your contractor if you were the client.

(Remember that your Code of Ethics applies to any staff and crew in your employ. They should be made aware of what it means to uphold it, as well as any consequences for violating it.)

**Sample Code of Ethics:**

*As a professional engaged in the business of providing construction and project management services, and as a member of [Your Company] I agree to conduct myself and my business in accordance with the following Code of Ethics.*

***Duty to the Public***

1. *I will be fair, honest, impartial, respectful, professional, and act in good faith in all my business relationships with my clients and the public, including employees, subcontractors and suppliers.*
2. *I will always act in the interests of the client, unless doing so violates a law, statute or this Code of Ethics.*
3. *I will not discriminate in any business activities on the basis of race, national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, familial status or handicap, and will comply with all federal, state and local laws concerning discrimination and fair housing.*
4. *I will be truthful regarding my training, experience, qualifications and services.*
5. *I will be truthful regarding my licenses and certifications, and will provide documentation upon request.*
6. *I will be truthful regarding my bonding and insurance coverage.*
7. *I will accept only assignments and projects for which my skills and licensing are commensurate.*
8. *I will uphold and comply with all governing codes, government and municipal statutes and rules, and professional licensing requirements of the jurisdiction in which I conduct business, especially those related to safety.*
9. *I will not engage in any practices that could be damaging to the public, including providing or promoting any building materials, products or techniques that are known to me to be defective, substandard or likely to cause harm. If such knowledge that is relevant to the project comes to my attention following contract execution and/or project commencement, I will take all necessary steps to notify all relevant parties and engage in immediate mitigation efforts, as I deem appropriate.*
10. *I will strive at all times to promote high-quality and safe building materials, products and techniques.*
11. *I will provide a timely and appropriate response to all items and workmanship covered under warranty.*
12. *I will use generally-accepted accounting principals in relation to all my financial transactions and reporting.*
13. *I will not engage in any deceptive practice or any practice that creates an unfair advantage for my company or other party.*
14. *I will compete fairly for projects and contracts and have no undisclosed conflict of interest with the client or with any party to the project or any transactions thereto.*
15. *I will not accept any undisclosed commission, rebate, profit, or other benefit from any party to the project.*
16. *I will not provide any undisclosed commission, rebate, profit, or other benefit to any party to the project, including for purposes of receiving referrals from any party connected to the project.*
17. *I will respect my client’s right to confidentiality with regard to financial and other details whose disclosure to other parties is not required for the advancement and completion of the project without the client’s prior written consent, except where it may affect the safety of others or violates a law or statute.*
18. *I will negotiate fairly and openly with my clients for reasonable compensation, and charge fees and expenses that are reasonable and commensurate with the services and materials to be provided and the responsibilities and risks to be assumed. I will use a written contract that specifies the services to be performed, limitations of services, expenses and fees, and will adhere to both the letter and the spirit of such contract.*
19. *I will meet all financial and contractual obligations in a timely and responsible manner.*
20. *Should conflicts arise, I will seek to have such disputes negotiated, including mediation or arbitration via an impartial third party, before resorting to litigation.*

***Duty to the Industry***

1. *I will uphold the integrity and dignity of my profession and not engage in any practices that could bring discredit to the construction industry.*
2. *I will seek to make a reasonable profit, but not at the expense of safety or workmanship.*
3. *I will uphold the conventions of my profession and will provide my services in a professional and workman-like manner.*
4. *I will comply with all the laws and regulations that govern its practice in my jurisdiction.*
5. *I will strive to engage in professional training and stay up to date with professional development, as well as news, notices and recalls that affect my industry and my clients.*
6. *I will not knowingly violate any law, statute or regulation in the performance of my professional services.*
7. *I will not maliciously or recklessly injure or attempt to injure, directly or indirectly, the professional reputation of others.*
8. *I will engage in ethical business practices that put safety and quality foremost.*
9. *I will seek to be a good steward of the environment in all my business and contracting practices.*

**Almost Everything You Do Can Generate Leads**

Marketing is important to any contracting business… whether you like it or not. The strength of your marketing programs can make or break your company.

It all starts with lead generation. Contractors often complain that they have too much work or not enough work. Creating steady pipeline of leads will end these complaints… quality leads that let you pick and choose the projects you want, attract the types of customers you want to work for, and pre-sell your services before you provide an estimate. Almost everything you do can generate leads.

**Using a Trophy Office and/or Shop to Promote Your Contracting Business**

Owners of construction companies are stereotyped as being hands-on, dirt-covered, hardhat-wearing hardasses who bark orders at their crews and conduct business on top of a sheet of plywood set up on two sawhorses, or out of a dusty, cluttered trailer whose air conditioner either doesn’t work, or works so loudly that it drowns out normal conversation. So far, so good. This is perfectly acceptable for working in the field. But what does your bricks-and-mortar office say about you, your business values, and your clientele—especially the ones you’re trying to attract?

Certain businesses cater to wealthy clients in posh areas that require impressive offices.  Your office is a direct reflection of your values and aesthetics, but you don’t have to operate beyond your profit margin to make a good impression. Consider having an upscale office space to help you maintain a professional image that will attract high-end projects, as well as give you a home base to trumpet your achievements.

Whether your business is expanding or you have an established office that’s in need of a makeover, consider the following factors as you create your business storefront.

**Rent or Buy?**Perhaps the first question to consider is whether it’s time for you to stop paying rent on your commercial office and simply buy the property, or buy or rent a different office space. Here are some questions to help you determine whether owning commercial property is right for your business.

* **Will the building help or hinder your growth?** Take a look at how fast your company has grown since you started it and try to predict how much space you will require in the future. You don’t want to be limited to the small storefront you’re in now if you’re growing fast. On the other hand, if your building has adjacent spaces occupied by other tenants, you might be able to gradually grow in place by taking over neighboring leases.
* **Can you pay the mortgage?** Calculate whether your monthly costs would rise if you took on a mortgage. Is it much higher than the rent you’re paying? If your business can't afford an increased expense, it could create cash-flow problems.
* **Can you make the down payment?** A commercial building purchase may require a large down payment, usually around 20%. If this payment puts your business in a cash crunch, it might be safer to hold off on property ownership for now.
* **How much control do you need?** You may eventually need to drastically alter your space as your company grows and discovers its own identity. You may want to, for instance, paint all the walls blue, knock down walls, or install heavy machinery that would be difficult or expensive to remove. Most landlords will not allow these sorts of alterations, especially if they are prohibited in your lease agreement. Purchasing a building will give you far more control over your own business and remove obstacles that would prevent its growth.
* **Will write-offs be possible?** If your business is profitable, property ownership can lessen your tax burden. You may be able to write off a portion of the building's cost each year in the form of depreciation. Another possibility is to buy the building personally and then rent it to your company, which is an ownership structure that has some tax advantages.
* **Is a good building available?** Research the market to see whether it’s a better idea to buy your existing building or find a more desirable location nearby. Keep in mind that moving and altering a new location will add to your short-term business costs and require advertising to let customers know where you've gone. An experienced commercial real estate agent should be able to help you with this research.
* **Are you cut out to be a landlord?** Maybe you’re fed up with dealing with a landlord, but are you ready to become one? If your building has other tenants, you’ll need to deal with all sorts of problems that arise and make difficult decisions ranging from building improvements to rent increases. Do you have the time to accommodate these additional responsibilities? If you don’t have the patience or time and you still want the property, consider hiring an experienced property manager.
* **What is the building’s potential as an investment?** Distance yourself from your business for a moment and remember that property ownership is itself an investment. You might need to sell the building in the future, which can make you money even if the business fails For instance, you may want to purchase a building that you know won’t attract much foot traffic if you think the building’s value will increase enough to make up for the lack of revenue.  Is the building in a thriving commercial district that’s popular and full of tenants, or is it mostly empty? Investigate the price trends. Will you be in the location long enough for it to increase in value?

The decision to switch from being a renter to a buyer of commercial real estate requires time for research in order to develop the most feasible plan for your finances and your long-term business goals. A commercial real estate professional can help with the financial questions, and a commercial property inspector can help with the physical and structural questions in your decision-making process.

When you’re ready to upgrade your business to a new space, here are some factors you should consider before making an appointment to look at any properties.

**Location**

* Find a commercial property that is **centrally located**.  Travel expenses may be deductible, but time is still money, so don’t spend too much on commuting. You also don’t want to spend more time away from your family than you already do.
* **Convenience** is important both for productivity and professionalism. Be sure you’re close to other businesses that provide your own business with necessary supplies and materials. In addition to lumber and other materials for projects, you’ll need printer cartridges, copier paper, and other miscellaneous office supplies. Imagine running out of printer paper and not having convenient access to supplies while you have a client waiting for a copy of his contract. Even if such things happen to everyone from time to time, your client is sure to remember this lack of preparation, which translates to a lack of professionalism.
* In addition to stores and other businesses that you must rely on for your daily operation, consider nearby **amenities**, such as restaurants in different price ranges, where you and your staff can grab a quick lunch, and others where you can entertain business clients.
* Do you want **a shop adjacent to or attached to your office**? Most contractors find this addition vital to their productivity. Find out what kind of zoning is required to accommodate the activities you want to conduct, and look for a location that will provide both an inviting office for clients and a shop that’s out of sight for projects. If you find a large enough rental space that’s not already set up as a shop, you can negotiate with your landlord on outfitting it to your needs. (There are tips to follow for how to make this happen for your business.)

**Expenses & Lease Terms**

* With the addition of increased rent, utilities and insurance, perhaps upgraded equipment and furniture, and the cost of revised letterhead and marketing materials, your **operating expenses** spike.  Can you afford them, based on the revenue you’re generating?  If you use an accountant (or even if you don’t), find out what business expenses and capital assets are deductible from your income tax.  You may be able to afford more for your upgraded office than you thought you thought you could realize.
* Is the commercial property owner amenable to **negotiating lease items**, such as build-outs, rent deductions, early release from the agreement, or a break on utilities?  While more and more small business owners are shutting their doors or moving their enterprises into their homes, exploit this aspect of the current economic downturn and negotiate with your prospective landlord on any details you can.
* Can you **share a rental space** with a complimentary business?  What factors of compatibility are important to you in maintaining productivity and professionalism?  Also, find out what areas of the premises are defined under your lease agreement, in addition to your responsibility for shared spaces.

Once you’ve found an upgraded commercial space to move into, you’ll need to make to-do and to-buy lists in order to make your new office functional, with little lost time for productivity.  It can take up to month of packing and planning before you’re ready to move into your new space and be running at optimal speed again.

To help ease that transition, consider the following checklist:

**Utilities**

Make sure the power is turned on before you move in.  Commercial accounts may take more lead-time for service providers to get you up and running.    These may include:

* **Electrical Receptacles:**  A commercial space has less wiggle room on local electrical codes than a residence.  Arrange your work area to accommodate the necessary electrical equipment and appliances such that you’re not stringing extension cords across high-traffic foot paths or stairs, or overloading individual receptacles.  Make sure your receptacles and power strips provide the proper grounding for plugs.  Commercial spaces are subject to municipal and county fire marshal inspections, and infractions can lead to serious fines and disruption of your work day.
* **Heating & Cooling:**  If your space isn’t equipped with HVAC, make provisions to have these added.  If renting, negotiate with your landlord about these upgrades.  You want your work space to be as comfortable as possible year-round.

**Communications**

We all have different abilities and tolerances for learning and using high-tech devices. Learning to use various types of electronic hardware and software can improve job efficiency and communications. Increased efficiency reduces costs, and these savings can then be passed along to your clients, which is something you can mention to your advantage in your marketing material. If you want your employees to learn to incorporate high-tech tools into their jobs, keep their stress levels low by supplying them with good instruction.

* **Phones:**    Many small businesses are transitioning from landlines to exclusively cell phones for their obvious portability, but you may want to maintain a no-frills landline to make other local calls in order to keep your main business line free, to ensure that you maintain the option for clear call quality, and to make emergency calls.  Don’t forget to add a professional-sounding outgoing message, and to check for messages regularly.  To improve your conversion rate (the percentage of initial calls that are converted into work), a live person answering the phone is always better than a recorded greeting and voicemail. Consider retaining a service if you can’t afford a secretary. Call forwarding to a dedicated cell phone or landline will allow you to have a family member answer phones with the name of your company. Be sure to list any appropriate new phone numbers on your company’s website and with directory assistance.
* **Internet Access:**  If you’re opting for a landline, adding Internet access can lower your monthly costs by taking advantage of “bundled” service discounts.  If going all-cellular, you’ll want to arrange for password-protected wireless service.  Consider the fastest connection offered in your area so that you can make the most of your business day.   Some service providers also offer VOIP (voice-over-Internet protocol), which allows you to listen to voicemail messages via email.
* **Laptops and Tablet Computers:**  Carrying a laptop into the field, especially one that is internet-enabled will facilitate communication with your office, with clients, suppliers, subcontractors and everyone else you deal with. The advantage to online communication is not only the great variety of information types that can be transferred online, but that everyone with whom you communicate with is only one click away from your website and other online marketing devices. Skype is a free communications application that will allow you to see the person to whom you are speaking, along with anything they care to show you with the camera installed in the computer or remote camera.

**Space & Use**

* **Work Areas**:  While a cramped home or starter office may have been sufficient for doing quick work online and then dashing off to an appointment, think long-term for making your upgraded office functional for you and hospitable to clients.  That means investing in office furniture for yourself and any staff that is solid and aesthetically neutral. Beyond desks, chairs and furniture for larger meeting areas, bookcases can house reference manuals, industry publications and code books.  Filing cabinets dedicated to your business can store hard-copy reports, photos and contracts.  There’s no need to spend big bucks at office furniture and supply stores; try shopping for second-hand items online (Craigslist is a good local resource) and at thrift stores.  (More guidelines for buying used furniture follow.) If buying new, always negotiate with the salesperson for a corporate account that provides built-in discounts; today’s economic climate favors the buyer for retail items, especially if you’re in the market for more than a single desk or chair.  Spread out in your new space as much as you can.  Organization is key to productivity.
* **Non-Work Areas**:  For meeting clients and hosting the occasional business function at your office, you want your new or upgraded office space to be comfortable but professional-looking. Again, there’s no need to go into debt to meet this goal.  As other businesses close or downsize, it’s possible to find second-hand items in classic styles with plenty of life left. Look for simple but sturdy desks, tables, chairs and lamps, and avoid styles, colors and patterns that look dated, especially if they’re priced to move. They should be clean and devoid of blemishes that can’t be easily repaired.  Keep reception and meeting areas uncluttered.
* **Privacy & Confidentiality**:  If you’ve been on a particularly dirty project and you need to change into clean clothes, make sure you have a private area.  If you’re having a conversation over the phone or in person, the details of which should not be broadcast to employees, clients or neighboring tenants, make sure you have a separate area in which to conduct such confidential business.  Partitions and noise barriers can help with this.  Likewise, you may wish to have a locking file cabinet or safe in which to store expensive equipment, and irreplaceable and confidential hard-copy records and downloaded computer files.
* **Shop Area**: If you have the space to have a shop adjacent to your office, this will also go a long way to enhancing your professional image with clients. Most contractors will find that ideal as it will be a huge time-saver for making minor adjustments and repairs to office-related and job-related materials and machinery, as well as project-related models, prototypes and fabrications. Make sure that your location and your lease provide for storing and using equipment that can be noisy while in operation during business hours (and off-hours, if you’re located near a residential area), as well as any hazardous materials, including paints, finishes, bonding materials and cleaners.   
    
  Potential clients may be impressed by a professional-looking, efficiently-run office, but an attached shop can also be a sales tool. If you have the ability to do custom milling, welding, or other work that couldn’t be done efficiently on a jobsite, show that ability to your clients. Walk them past the materials, tools and jigs. If you have someone working in the shop, so much the better. That gives the impression that your services are in demand! Have your workman explain a little about what they’re doing.   
    
  Bear in mind that if you use your shop as a sales tool, it should be safe and clean, meaning visible personal protective equipment (PPE) and dust removal equipment for saws, sanders, etc.

**Provisions for the Office & Shop**

* **Office Supplies**:  Copier paper, toner, printer ink cartridges, paper clips and pens can deplete your budget in a hurry, so buy only what you estimate you’ll need for the first three months.  This will help you budget long-term more precisely.  Remember, too, that if you have employees in your new space, you’re responsible for providing them with the tools they’ll need to perform their jobs properly, so don’t make them scrounge for the basics in order to get their daily work done.  Failing to account for simple provisions like these can be morale-killers, along with a lack of secondary supplies.
* **Secondary Supplies**:  If you’re sharing kitchen and/or restroom facilities with a neighboring business, find out who is responsible for supplies, and maintain an appropriate budget.  If responsible only for your own, consider buying in bulk at shopping clubs, or work out a deal with a local vendor who supplies neighboring businesses.  Remember to make scheduled stops for supplies such as coffee, tea, soft drinks, snacks, condiments and restroom supplies so that you can avoid last-minute impulse purchases, which tend to be more expensive.
* **Kitchen**:  Even the most basic hotel room now provides a mini-fridge, coffee maker and microwave, so think of your own fundamental comforts and that of your clients (and your employees, if you have any), and outfit an area dedicated to these needs.  Eating lunch in the office a few days a week and having a place to store some staples will also save you petty cash and productivity.
* **Emergency Supplies**:  Whether you have other employees or not, the responsibility of using a commercial business space dictates that you have a fully-stocked first aid kit on hand.  Additionally, local fire codes will probably also require you to have several of these, depending on the size of your commercial space and/or number of employees, along with a fire extinguisher and flashlight, as well as clearly marked exits.  Depending on your comfort level, work schedule, and the climate of your geographic region, you may want to stock a personal emergency kit that contains extra batteries, canned goods, blankets and sleeping cot, bottled water, spare toiletries, and extra footwear and clothing.
* **Office Equipment**:  If your business has expanded to the point that you’re considering investing in capital equipment, such as a computer system and/or copier, investigate whether leasing is a better deal than an outright purchase.  Be wary of purchasing these items second-hand.  Manufacturers tend to upgrade their models every couple of years, and finding knowledgeable service technicians and replacement parts can make what appeared to be a good deal at the outset an expensive and obsolete heap of plastic and metal that you’ll have to pay to dump.  Always negotiate on long-term service contracts.  Demand an upgrade if the machine you’ve contracted for develops chronic problems, which can lead to aggravation and downtime.  Conversely, if the machine you’re leasing is problem-free, negotiate for a less expensive service contract, since there are few or no service calls.

**Shop Equipment & Supplies**: As mentioned earlier, organization is key to productivity, and the same rule applies to shops. Remember that more than one person may be using the shop, which is why it should always be clean, orderly, and have a home for every tool, bucket, bottle, can, nut and bolt. You may find occasion to conduct some of your business with a client in the shop area, so it should always be presentable, even if there’s a project in progress.

* **Proper ventilation and drainage** should be provided for fumes, vapors and liquids. It should also be appropriately soundproofed from the rest of the office area and nearby tenants. If possible, a mop sink should be installed for extra-dirty wash-ups so that the restroom in the office area is not used and unnecessarily soiled between regular cleanups.
* **Locking tool chests** will ensure that expensive and specialized tools remain on the premises. If the shop has a back door, it should be locked and integrated with the office site’s security system.
* Maintaining a **separate supply inventory** for the shop will also be useful to combine shopping trips, requiring less time to stock up on office essentials.

**Office Maintenance**

Your office requires regular maintenance just like your home and vehicle. If your staff is enlisted to take care of cleaning the reception area, meeting room, kitchen, bathroom and/or shop, make sure you devise a regular schedule and that they understand that they should clean any messes that happen during the interim. If you or your staff won’t be taking care of this, hire only a licensed and bonded janitorial service that will contract with you to clean your premises during regularly scheduled times, and will be bonded to protect your business against theft or loss due to their acts or negligence. If you are required to provide brooms, mops, trash bags and cleaning supplies, make sure these are on your weekly shopping list. Also, be sure to notify the cleaning crew and their supervisors of any areas on site that are off limits, and that this information is also specified in your contract with the service.

**Comfort & Convenience**

* **Décor**:  Carefully consider your clientele when choosing personal items and artwork to decorate your office.  Your personal touches help establish the corporate culture of your business, even if it’s a corporation of just one.  Any fine art and prints, and even hunting and fishing trophies, should be subtle and not the central focus of the office. Remember: it’s not your man-cave away from home, so leave the joke-themed and off-color items at home where they belong. Items should be framed and mounted using tasteful and low-key frames and plaques. A hobby store’s framing department can choose these for you, which is an affordable option for most.

Be sure to display items that speak to your professional achievements. Frame and display course completion certificates and professional association memberships. Portfolio pictures from jobs are essential for your walls, especially those showing you shaking hands with happy clients (which is a good reason to always have a camera available out in the field), as well as positive reference letters thanking you for your good work. Keep a photo album in your meeting room. You can also display industry-related awards as well as scale models of projects; these are, in themselves, works of art worth showing off, and they also speak to your professional accomplishments.

Another way to give the impression of personal stability and your investment in the community is to display family photos. If you put them on your desk rather than on the wall, be sure they’re at an angle where your visitors can see them. Or you can place them on a bookshelf or credenza behind your desk and chair so they’ll also naturally face outward.   
  
Additionally, if you’ve received any awards from local newspapers or certificates from organizations not directly related to your business activities, hang these proudly alongside your professional accolades. Your identity as a builder includes not just what you do with your hands, but also what you do as a member of the community, including volunteer work. Even local sports trophies count!

Along with personal artwork and trophies, you can display industry-related conversation starters. These are great for breaking the ice when meeting new clients and for relieving tension if the conversation may involve some stressful topics. For example, if you specialize in roofs, you might have a mold of one of the largest hailstones to ever hit the area, or evidence of some other natural disaster or on-the-job oddity. Again, don’t clutter your office, but appoint it tastefully with items that speak to your commitment to both your industry and your community. As always, keep these items (as well as the rest of your office) tidy and dust-free.

Also, if your office has a waiting area, be sure to subscribe to and leave some trade magazines on the table. This leaves clients with the perception that you stay abreast of the latest industry-related news and trends. Remember to always keep the reception and waiting areas tidy. Your client expects a quiet, clean and orderly place to meet with you and conduct his/her business with you.

* **Lighting**:  Natural daylight isn’t always available in office spaces, but don’t underestimate the effect of lighting for reasons other than just to see what you’re doing.  It can affect mood and productivity in direct and indirect ways.  Some offices and warehouses provide basic overhead fluorescent-tube lighting, which can be adequate but garish, and even noisy, so consider augmenting those sources with low spot-lighting, desk lamps and wall sconces.  Energy-efficient bulbs come in colors of the visible spectrum that are easier on the eyes and reflect a glow that “warms up” the area to appear more inviting.  Of course, they’re better for the environment, as well as your body and your budget, in the long run.
* **Plants:**  Live plants can add an important touch that exudes relaxation, comfort, and a green consciousness. If you don’t have the time to take care of office plants yourself, a plant or floral service is a good investment. For a business-friendly monthly rate, it will first deliver and then monitor the weekly health and watering of your foliage. This is a simple way to advertise that you understand the aesthetic importance of live greenery. It emits the message that you have taste and value quality. Quality means comfort. If you don’t think this is true, think back and rate your own comfort level in offices and waiting rooms that you visited that had no foliage, some foliage, dying foliage, lush foliage, and fake silk plants. Healthy greenery has an instantly calming effect, and the more stressful and/or high-end the business, the nicer the plants you’ll find in the lobby. These plants don’t have to overtake the office environment, and they should never show signs of neglect, which is much worse than not having any live plants at all. Avoid silk plants; no silk plant actually looks real, and the message it transmits is that you either a) don’t pay attention to the finer details of an indoor environment or b) that cheapness is an acceptable substitute for quality.

**Security**

* Provisions for **securing your business premises** should be clearly spelled out in your lease.  Follow a ritual at the end of the day to make sure that all doors and windows are properly closed and locked, and if you have shades or drapes, make sure they’re closed at night, too.  A security system is a sound investment. Adequate lighting for the immediate exterior, as well as the parking area, is a safety as well as liability concern.   Additionally, get acquainted with local law enforcement, and find out whether their regular patrols include the location of your workplace, especially if it’s in a more industrial area, rather than in an office building in the middle of town.
* Other physical safety concerns include **locking filing cabinets and safes**. If many people have access to the same work documents, they may get easily misplaced if they aren’t treated as documents that need to be secured. This can delay work and frustrate clients. Additionally, if you’re like many contractors, you have firearms on the premises. These should be kept unloaded in a locking case and safely stowed. The local police department will have information to help you stay within the law, especially if you have employees on the premises and clients who visit. Again, it’s not just a question of safety; it’s one of liability.
* Security includes backing up your **computer data**. You can easily be done with a thumb drive, writable CDs or and external hard drive. If you’re a larger company, you may have a central server that backs up all networked data. You can also pay a monthly fee to have your data backed up and stored off-site, which is a lifesaver in case a catastrophic power outage.

**Miscellaneous Considerations**

* **Children & Pets:** One of the benefits of owning your own business is that you can take your children and pets to work with you.  Children require constant attention, so make sure your attention isn’t divided, leading to a potential accident, or creating an unprofessional atmosphere.  Also, don’t expect your employees to double as your babysitter.  In terms of pets, some of them don’t adjust well to strangers or unfamiliar surroundings, and some clients and employees may have allergies and even phobias.  What’s okay around the house or even out in the field won’t necessarily work in the workplace, even if you’re the boss, so think like a business person and make decisions based on what’s best for your business.
* **Music:** Your choice of music in the office, if you have any, can make as big an impression as your office décor, so make it low-key, quiet enough to conduct conversations both in person and on the phone, and neutral in terms of content.
* **Recreational & After-Hours Activities:** Most contractors have some alcohol on their work premises, so it’s important that if you have staff and/or visiting clients, such beverages are kept in an appropriate and lockable location on site that cannot be accessed by uninvited (or underage) personnel or visitors. Its presence should not be advertised. Other activities, such as smoking, watching TV or playing video games may be allowed during certain times, but make sure they are confined to specific areas so that the professional atmosphere of your workplace is maintained. Not every client will appreciate a loose or laid-back contractor. If you engage in any recreational activities after hours, be sure your offices are locked to outside visitors, requiring them to knock or ring a bell for permission to enter. Your lease or a local ordinance may prohibit alcohol consumption on site business during regular business hours.

**Running a Green Office**

Most small business owners have their hands full just trying to stay on top of their current workload, as well as marketing themselves for more work, and contractors are no exception.  But whether you lease an office or are a new commercial property owner, everyone can make some simple and painless improvements to their workplace and work habits that will minimize their carbon footprint and save money. As an added bonus, demonstrating to visiting clients that you run a green business is a great marketing tool for anyone in the construction industry, since saving on home energy is such a solid trend now. If you practice what you preach, you’ll have that much more credibility in the industry.

Here are some tactics that you can start using today:

* Use recycled paper for your contracts, reports and updates, and marketing materials, and make sure you use a logo that tells your customers so.  “Printed on 90% post-consumer waste” (or whatever applies) can provide your prospective clients with a positive heads-up that you’re environmentally conscious.  Recycled paper and cardstock are also generally cheaper, which can lower your costs for office supplies.  Also, if you must print out something and it's for internal use only, use the reverse side of paper that you would otherwise throw away. While it may be difficult or impossible for contractors to develop an entirely paperless office, you can drastically reduce the amount of paper you use and store by using and storing plans and documents electronically. Hardcopy documents can be scanned by one of several different devices. Plans are typically created electronically, so they can be easily stored electronically. Using a large-format printer you can print out plans as needed, including partial sets for subcontractors.
* Recycle your printer cartridges.  Most printer service and retail outlets will accept these and reward you with a discount on your next purchase.
* Get organized.  Maximize your time by minimizing your driving trips around town.  Shop online, when possible.  You’ll save wear and tear on your vehicle, and you’ll spare the air of your emissions.
* Pay your bills online.  This decreases what you spend on postage, and cuts down on the mail you receive, much of which winds up in the trash anyway, such as promotional inserts and window envelopes.
* If it’s cold in your office, add a layer of clothing, rather than turn up the heat.  Likewise, if it’s warm, open a window instead of turning on the A/C.  If ventilation to the outdoors is not practical, consider running the A/C intermittently rather than continuously throughout the day.  Be sure to use fans to assist with air movement, as well as shades to block the sunlight through windows.
* If you don’t already have a low-flow toilet at your office, place a brick in the tank of your toilet to save on water used for flushes. If you are installing a toilet, consider buying a dual-flush type.
* Find ways to let natural light into your workspace to cut down on the use of electric lights.  Where practical, change your incandescent bulbs to energy-saving compact fluorescent bulbs (CFLs) and T8 fluorescent bulbs, which can reduce your lighting energy costs by up to 75%.
* Use cups, plates and silverware in your office kitchen, rather than paper products.  If you buy disposable products, consider purchasing the newer biodegradable plastics made of corn.   Also, purchase paper supplies in bulk, which will reduce your shopping trips, as well as your expenses.
* When upgrading tools and equipment, donate what you no longer use, if selling is impractical.  Many thrift stores, including outlets run by Habitat for Humanity, will gladly accept a worn tape measure, flashlight, and even work boots.  Just make sure that items such as ladders are safe before passing them along.
* Many office supply stores that sell tech, such as Staples, OfficeMax and Kinko’s, will accept your outmoded cell phones, computers and printers to dispose of at bulk savings to them, or they will refurbish them for resale or donation.  Tech hardware disposed of in landfills is among the most toxic sources of soil and groundwater contamination today because of the chemicals contained in their components, and the results of the biochemical breakdown of their materials.  If you don’t want to pay a fee to dispose of these items responsibly, take them to a recycling center or retail outlet that will gladly take them off your hands.
* Before hauling something out to the Dumpster, consider re-purposing it.  An old door can be converted into a work table in the shop area, and cork and foamboard can be used as a bulletin board.  Old t-shirts make handy rags for the office and work truck.
* Make sure your computers, printers and copiers are set to energy-saving or sleep mode when not in use for extended periods.  Also, consider routinely unplugging electrical items at the end of the day, since coffee makers, lamps and power strips that are turned off but remain plugged in continue to draw current.
* Before making a purchase, look online at websites such as Craigslist and Freecycle to see if you can find what you need for less than new, or even free.  Several different categories on such sites offer building supplies and materials, tools, and office equipment and products at second-hand prices for sometimes brand new items, which can save you money that you can put toward more meaningful purchases.
* If you want to buy new office furniture, consider buying chairs, desks, tables and bookcases made from wood that has been reclaimed or that originates from sustainably harvested forests.  Look for certifications on wood products from the Forestry Stewardship Council and the Rainforest Alliance.  In addition to sparing living trees, reclaimed and sustainably harvested wood has the advantage of being free of formaldehyde and volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which is better for your health, as well as the planet’s.
* Make your business website robust.  Take advantage of the marketing tips and tools included in this book so that your prospective clients can find the information they need about you and your services online.  This will save them time (and aggravation), and will impress them with your technological savvy.  For many people, using technology to its fullest potential is equivalent to being green, and this method of marketing yourself can set you apart from your competition.  Give your prospective customers a genuine sense of yourself and your (green) business ethic by creating a specific and indelible web presence. Hiring a pro to do this may be the best investment you’ll ever make in your business and your future.

Moving into a new commercial space is an exciting step forward for your business.  Make your move stress-free with careful planning before you pack up the first box.

And remember: Your goal is to create an impression for your clients that says that you value quality first, both at the job site and in your own work environment.

**The Red Phone**

All contractors should have a dedicated phone number--and even a dedicated phone--that's used only for new business.  In fact, this dedicated phone should be red in color (which you can easily make by using a basic colored cell phone cover).  An actual red phone is your instant reminder that there is no phone call that you'll answer all day that's more important than a call for new business.  This red phone should have the phone number you would list in any and all advertising that's designed to acquire new clients, such as emails and newsletters to new potential customers, print ads, truck signage, yard signs, billboards and direct mail.

You can use a different “main” number in your contracts, for suppliers, and for general business use.  That way, you or your staff can man the red phone and leave the other phone number to be used primarily for everyday, routine business.  The red phone should always be manned because it means new business, and you should never let new business get away under any circumstances.

If you’re a one-person operation, be sure to ask your clients whether they’d mind if you took calls during your meeting with them; most of them won’t object if you ask in advance.  Let your everyday phone calls go to voicemail if you’re busy, but always answer your red phone.  Prospective clients won’t be interested in leaving you a voicemail; they’ll just move on to the next contractor.  If you carry both phones with you out in the field, make sure your “everyday” phone is turned off during meetings.  Make both phones’ ringtones different so that you know which phone is ringing so that you can pick up any "red phone" calls.  If you're meeting with a client, ask them for permission to answer your phone during the meeting.  Your client's confidence in you will increase if s/he sees you are in demand from other consumers trying to hire you.

**Toll Free Numbers**

Avoid using toll-free numbers.  Unless you’re a national company, you’ll only be working locally, so why offer the illusion that you’re saving your prospective clients any money with a simple phone call?  Besides, customers will choose the local contractor with the local area code.  They want to talk to the actual contractor who'll be working for them.  A toll-free number implies an impersonal, non-local corporation that will send someone out whom the client won’t get to speak to beforehand.  A few very cheap customers appreciate toll-free numbers to save a few pennies.  Let your competitors have those customers.

**After Hours**

If you accept new business calls after hours, keep your red phone on and your other phones off.  One way to prevent website visitors from hesitating to call you after hours is to add something along the lines of the following sentence under your red phone's phone number: "Please don't call after 9:30 p.m."  Many consumers are on your website in the evening and this sentence will let them know it's OK to call you at 8:15 p.m.  It also implies that they will get YOU... the contractor, in person.

**Receptionists**

Whoever answers the phone better be a polite, efficient, natural-born salesperson. Your receptionist is more important than anyone else in your company.

**Defending Your Online Brand**

Your brand—which includes your business name, logo, and other identifying features—should be well-guarded. It’s unique. It’s an extension of your physical business and services. And it’s likely to be the first and perhaps only advertising about you that your prospective clients will see. The Internet presents almost overwhelming challenges to policing one’s commercial identity both online and off, so part of your regular marketing duties must include monitoring your brand and reputation. Litigation after the fact may be necessary in the long run, but it’s costly and time-intensive, and the violations worth suing over are largely preventable, if you keep tabs on yourself.

**Website Domain Defense**

Anything that can be sold or monetized online can be unfairly—and often illegally—exploited. Just because you have a registered business name and are willing to pay an annual fee to a site-hosting vendor doesn’t mean that you’re legally entitled to use that name. Your unique name, and even variations of its proper spelling, may have been claimed by someone else. A simple search of your business’ name may reveal that a site for it already exists. What’s more, it’s likely that it’s a site that has no other reason for taking up cyberspace than because the registered owner is waiting for you to contact him to offer to buy the domain name, which is really genuinely valuable only to you. However, the only way for you to legally use the site name is to purchase it from the registered owner—typically, for an exorbitant fee. This is known as domain-squatting or cybersquatting. It’s technically defined as bad-faith registration because the registered owner purchases domain names for the express purpose of selling them at a profit to those who have a legitimate professional or commercial interest in them.

Laws prohibiting this practice went on the books as early as 1999 with the enactment of the Anti-Cybersquatting Consumer Protection Act. But because it can’t be enforced on a global scale (as well as arguments of First Amendment protections of free speech), its legal effectiveness is limited.

(The Federal Trademark Dilution Act of 1995 protects against trademark violations and those whose intent is to profit by registering or using an identical or confusingly similar name.)

A variation of cybersquatting is typosquatting. Bad-faith registrants anticipated that users who look online for website names often get the names wrong, so they buy up domain names with similar but slightly altered spellings to account for users looking for the proper domain name but who then misspell or mistype the name in their browser bar or into a search engine.

Still another notorious practice of unscrupulous cyber trolls is known as renewal-snatching or alert-angling. Most domain owners must re-file and pay for their site registration annually. Trolls and cybersquatters may use software tools that automatically register a popular site’s domain name the moment the registration expires. A lapsed registration is fair game, regardless that you may have paid for it and legally owned it for the past five or ten years. This can be devastating to your online brand and your ability to conduct your daily business.

**Nailing Down Your Website Name**

If you have yet to create your website, do an online search for a business name that’s as close as possible to your actual business name. Purchase all the registrations for your domain name, including all the variations you can think of that they will re-direct searchers to your site, including those ending in “.net” and “.biz.” You can do a generic search or use a registration vendor site, such as GoDaddy.com, which sifts through the various searches for you. The searches are typically free; it’s the registrations that will cost you. Also, ask family and friends to test for natural typos for your business name so that you can buy those, too, before the typosquatters get to them. This may seem like a large and unnecessary investment, but the downside is that you can lose control of your brand, which can create endless hassles not only for you, but for those trying to find you online. It’s much better to pay an annual fee and be assured that you will remain the registered owner than to worry about legal delays and possible litigation later. This will rob you of valuable time you need for work. Website management and all its tangential considerations shouldn’t be a full-time job.

If someone else has registered your most desirable website name (and/or its variations), find out who the registered owner is. If this information isn’t provided on the website itself, there are websites that specialize in helping you search, such as DomainTools.com (which charges a fee), or the “whois” query and response protocol. When you find out who the registered owner is, it’s best to contact him using a non-business email account. Writing from an email account that reflects a variation of the online business name that you’re interested in purchasing will tip your hand and demonstrate that the domain you want to buy is valuable to you, which may automatically inflate the price. Since it’s difficult to predict how much you’ll need to spend, it’s best to keep your opening gambit low. When you’ve made successful contact, ask whether the name is for sale, rather than immediately extend an offer to purchase it. Again, you want to keep the transaction as low-key as possible. The purchase price can be anywhere from a few hundred dollars to a few thousand; you will have to decide what it’s worth to you. (Remember that you’ll have to pay this fee only once; re-registering it every year is similar to registering your vehicle annually, and you’ll be dealing with the site’s registrar.) The downside for the domain owner is that if he gouges you on the price and you tell him you don’t want to purchase it, he may realize that he won’t get the opportunity again to sell it, which is the only reason he purchased it in the first place. It can be an unpleasant negotiation, but remember that it’s still a negotiation, so try not to get emotional.

If you’re determined to acquire the name but you can’t do so at an affordable or fair price, it may be time to call in the big guns. Disputes with bad-faith registrants over domain names can be resolved using the Uniform Domain Name Resolution Policy process developed by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN).

Remember to renew your site’s registration before it expires. Purchase the longest registration period available, and make sure you know the date your registration expires so that you don’t accidentally allow it to lapse.

**Your Good Name Online**

What you do online regarding your business is only half the equation; those who use your services, and business names that are similar to yours, can affect your brand and reputation, too. That’s why it’s important to monitor your online reputation, as well as your brand.

There are online reputation-monitoring and brand-infringement services that will do this kind of tracking for you, but a quick perusal shows that a number of these services have problems with their own websites, such as their navigation, contact information, credentials, appearance, and even the spelling and grammar on their site’s pages. If they can’t be trusted to keep their own online presence professional-looking and error-free, should you trust them with your site? More to the point is that you’re paying someone else to do what you should be doing for yourself for a fee that doesn’t guarantee 100% protection. You’re not a corporation that employs a gaggle of lawyers; keep your overhead low and keep on top of your own online reputation. At least in the initial stages, you should do this monitoring yourself.

An easy way to monitor online activity related to your business is to do a search of your business name. You can do this weekly or daily to see what pops up. You may be surprised to discover that other businesses have mentioned you on their sites. Are these associations positive? Are they valid—do you actually have a professional relationship with them, or are they attempting to piggyback on your success or name recognition? Have they co-opted your trademarked tagline? It’s important to acknowledge these positive and negative associations as soon as you discover them, to either cultivate and expand on them, or to shut them down and issue a general warning that you are monitoring your brand and are prepared to legally escalate any brand or copyright infringements, should you discover them. Never underestimate the temerity of an unscrupulous online competitor or copyright thief. By the same token, never underestimate the power of the threat to take a person to court if they infringe on your brand. Most threats work instantly, as these types of fly-by-nighters don’t want to chance discovery and prosecution, which can include criminal as well as civil charges.

You can also be notified of instances of your business name being searched using Google Alerts. This also works for brand names, slogans and proprietary product names and services. Anyone favorably discussing your products and services online creates information that you can post on your website. (You can do this without their permission; once it’s accessible on the Internet, it’s generally fair game to re-post. But if the information was written by a past client, it’s good public relations to ask to re-use their comments on your site as a courtesy, as well as to get more feedback.)

Perhaps a blogger has mentioned her encounter with your business; read what she’s written, including any comments on her post. Online reviews can be informative and valuable. You may want to ask to link to the blogger’s positive comments, or to copy them to your site. Cultivate these positive associations.

You may discover that someone has said something unfavorable about your or your business. This is always disappointing, but it can be just as valuable and informative as positive feedback—even more so. The first question you should ask yourself is whether the criticism is legitimate. If it’s a comment about your office staffers, for example, don’t assume that they can do no wrong; investigate the claim as fully as possible. Then, ask yourself whether you can improve your products and services based on the feedback.

Some negative feedback is not instructive or constructive. It may be merely unkind commentary, or what used to be called “flaming.” You may have to let certain criticisms go; the more personal or hysterical a flame is, the more it speaks to the commenter’s conduct, rather than yours, and you will have to trust that other readers can make that same judgment for themselves.

But if a business or individual has made a false claim about you or your business, you will have to take action. You can’t let untrue or libelous claims go unanswered. Recycled information on the Internet has a way of becoming “fact,” and you need to stop it as soon as you become aware of it and take counter-measures to protect your online reputation and brand.

If the commentary is not merely negative but slanderous, you can shut it down by emailing the offender a warning. First, find out who posted the comments. Most negative commentary is posted anonymously or using an online username that hides the owner’s email address. Can you tell who the person is by what they’ve written, such as a disgruntled ex-employee or a particularly unhappy client? If the person’s email is not readily available based on the comment, and the comments are false and designed to injure your reputation, you should write to the site’s administrator and warn them to take down the comments. Neither the owner of a website or blog nor a website that specializes in online consumer reviews is immune from legal action for allowing false or libelous posts to remain if you’ve lodged a formal complaint asking that they remove them. Under U.S. libel law, a website’s legal liability for publishing defamatory comments is as great as the person posting it, and before things reach a litigious stage, the website administrators will likely delete the offending post. Remember, though, that such comments must be false, and they must also threaten to injure your professional reputation and damage your business. If matters were to proceed to an actual lawsuit, as the plaintiff in a libel case, you would have to prove injury based on the comment’s falsehoods. Otherwise, the defendants could claim—and win—on their rights to protected speech under the First Amendment, which includes unflattering and negative reviews, even if they’re resorted to childish name-calling. Pull apart these comments to discern what is merely dissatisfied bloviating, and what is opinion presented as fact. You may wish to pursue legal advice to understand these distinctions better.

**Build Your Own Reputation Through Website Maintenance**

In addition to monitoring the reach of your brand online, including comments and trademark usage, you can do a lot to maintain control and get regular search-engine optimization activity by maintaining a dynamic website.

You may think that you’ve already posted your products, services, business hours, location, testimonials, and some great photos, so that’s really all you need. But you can make your site robust and interactive by adding more content. Consider adding a special section that features interesting links that are related to your business activity. For example, do you promote green building materials? Then post a link to some government-sponsored information that’s relevant to your remarks and products. Write an article (or hire a writer occasionally) who can add value to your website by writing relevant and topical articles. Visitors to your site will appreciate that you don’t let your website languish, but that you take an active interest in news and trends that affect your industry.

Take advantage of the power of SEO; for blog posts and articles, make sure you use keywords and track-backs as much as possible. You want your special website content to be robust and searchable. When prospective clients do a generic search online, you want them to find you first (or second, or third).

It’s important to strike a balance between what your online presence can do and what you should leave to others. Don’t get too over-invested in the typical bells and whistles found on a website. Paid ads and click-per-views are not recommended; unlike a stand-alone blog, your site is not your product—it’s promoting your product. Your site is used to sell your services. If you do include paid or sponsored ads, make sure they’re legitimate and that you have a sustained relationship with those vendors. Otherwise, not only will you be putting money into the pockets of counterfeit vendors, but your association with them will tarnish your own brand and reputation, and it will be nearly impossible to recover unless you change your business name and launch a whole new marketing campaign, which will be costly and time-intensive. Make these sponsorships relevant to your business and mutually beneficial. Any sites you link to your site should have link-backs, which you should check occasionally.

It’s also a good idea to occasionally search for businesses in your area to see if they’re worth cultivating for an online bump in SEO and name-recognition. Or, if someone has taken a hit (such as one engineering firm whose commercial buildings were found to be faulty structurally), you may want to consider removing their name or logo from your site, as well as pulling your implied endorsement from theirs. This is a delicate decision for a number of reasons. Legally speaking, any agreement or contract must be modified beforehand. But don’t allow someone else’s faltering reputation to injure yours.

Remember that business reputations in a changing economy are dynamic, so monitor yours regularly, and become your own PR expert so that you can maintain control over your brand and good name.

**Logos for Contractors**

Tips:

1. I think your logo should cause your customers to start thinking about the products or services that you currently offer. But if you want to make your logo generic enough to work should your business change in the future, you can do that by adding a tagline (that you can later change if your company changes) under the logo.
2. Make sure that your design isn’t so similar to a competitor’s that it infringes on their mark. Your logo should be distinctive.
3. If you logo is in color, it should also work in black and white so that it is legible when copied.
4. Logos should be in vector format so that they scale to any size.
5. Be sure that if you have your logo designed by a professional that you receive all the file formats necessary for use in your various marketing channels.

*“The difference between the almost right word & the right word is really a large matter--it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”*

Mark Twain - Letter to George Bainton, 10/15/1888

**Taglines for Contractors**

I don’t think your tagline should be cute or fancy. I think the highest and best use of your tagline is to have it spell out exactly what services you offer.

Tagline examples:

* *Denver’s Best General Contractor*
* *[Your Company] is [Your City]’s Premier [Your Service] Company*
* *Done Once, Done Right* **®**

**Brochures for Contractors**

You only get one chance to make a good first impression. A key part of successful marketing is your brochure.  Many consumers will decide whether or not to call you based on it. Your brochure -- not you -- defines your image.  You might only get this one shot, so make it a good one.

We all have strengths and weaknesses. Being able to identify your own may be difficult, but it can be very beneficial. Some weaknesses you can improve quickly, but with others, the time required may not be worth the effort. If design is not your strong point, you need to recognize that and hire a professional.

If you intend to create your own, collect good brochures and notice the design details that make them outstanding.

**The Goal of a Brochure**

The main purpose of a contractor’s brochure is to:

* generate sales leads;
* provide documentation to justify higher prices; and
* sell additional services.

In short, a brochure’s goal is to sell more contracting services to more people, more often, for more money.

**Bad brochures un-sell**

A quality brochure implies that you are a veteran contractor, and a cheap brochure implies that you are new to the business.  If you are a veteran contractor with a home-printed cheap brochure, you will look new to the business.  By the same token, a high-quality brochure.  A brochure can sell or un-sell...it’s up to you.

**Manufacturer’s Brochures**

Many construction product manufacturers offer brochures that you can co-op for your company. Some even offer to help pay for you to have them printed. They aren’t helping you pay to print your brochure, you’re helping pay for theirs. They promote the manufacturer and the product, not you. Don’t use them. You can have your own brochure that is equally as professional looking and which works solely for you.

**Delivering the Message**

If your brochure design is just a hodgepodge of material without a well-planned, focused message, don’t even print it. What is the message you want to convey? Answer:

*I am the quality contractor you want to hire.*

**Headlines**

Your headlines are often all that are read.  If you can say the same thing using fewer words… do it.  The reader is scanning your brochure, so your headlines should read like that of news story.  Brochures are nothing more than garbage on the way to the trash can.  Your job is to get a message delivered on the way to the trash, so keep your headlines short.  If you must break (continue onto a second line) a long headline so it fits on a tri-fold brochure, try to find a natural break, with the second line being longer than the first, if possible, but breaking at the natural pause takes precedence.

Worst:

*ABC Contracting is num-*

*ber one in Kentucky.*

Better:

*ABC Contracting is*

*number one in Kentucky*

Best:

*ABC Contracting*

*is number one in Kentucky*

Another mistake is to put a period at the end of headlines.  Periods stop the reader from going further, which is why newspapers don’t use them at the end of headlines.

**Nothing to Brag About**

Avoid "minimum expectation" taglines or slogans.  For example:

*ABC Contracting*

*Thorough and friendly service is our motto*.

It better be thorough and friendly! There is general overuse of the words *thorough, professional* and *quality* within the construction industry. Avoid such cliché adjectives. Here is a better slogan:

*ABC Contracting*

*Done once, done right.*

**Words That Sell**

The overall impression your brochure conveys is more important than the actual information.  There are certain words that sell inspection services.

* *You/your.* Talk directly to the reader.  Instead of writing, *"Our clients receive the service..."* try writing *"You will receive the service..."*
* *I.* If you are a one-man operation, say so.  Customers seek personal service.  Instead of writing, *"Our company's goal is... "* or *"We at ABC* *Contracting seek to..."* try writing, *"I will perform..."*
* *Easy.* Home buyers don't want their lives more difficult at this time.  So, write: *"The report will be easy to read and understand."*
* *Certified.* Anyone can say whatever one wants about themself.  The word *"certified"* is the ultimate testimonial.

**Your Photo**

A picture of you is a must.  You are not selling a product… you are selling yourself.  You are the product. You can’t judge a book by its cover, but many readers do, so reconsider using your picture if you:

* look very overweight. It implies that you can’t do the work yourself.
* look very young. It implies that you are inexperienced.
* look like a mass-murderer.

If you are male and have a ponytail, hide it in the photograph. You want the reader to identify with you.  Keep your picture as simple as possible. Consider using digital air-brushing to touch up your picture.

**Other Pictures**

Make sure each picture earns its keep.  A picture of a house within a contracting brochure is a waste of prime advertising space.  Each picture should help sell your service.  Perhaps the picture could be of you on a project. Sell yourself.  You cannot bore people into hiring you.

**Don’t be Silly**

Avoid cartoons. Cartoon graphics do not present a professional image.  Would a professional engineer use cartoons?  And don’t make up clever plays on words.  Strike the right tone.

**Captions**

Make sure every picture or illustration has a caption below it.  Each caption must be an ad within itself.  Each caption must promise the reader a benefit.  Also, a picture of a finished project is smart. Ads for cooking ingredients always show a picture of the finished dish.

**Testimonials**

Add a few quotes from satisfied agents and clients.  The use of short references works, but you should always get permission first.

Don’t include anonymous quotes…they must include a full name and city.  Only credible testimonials work.

**Make Them Want You**

Make your list of qualifications as long as possible.  List direct work experience, any licenses or special qualifications, along with any higher education, even if it’s not directly related.

**Breathing Room**

White space is a tool to use sparingly.  Make related item lists compact.  Then use white/blank space around them to clarify related items.  Be consistent with the spacing and margins throughout the brochure, but don’t overdo it.  Give your readers enough information to hire you.  Direct-mail advertisers use long body copy because it works (and they know it).  Your Qualifications list can literally run right off the bottom of the brochure, as if you didn’t have enough room to list them all.

**Insurance**

List the fact that you carry General Liability and specify that your employees are fully covered by workman’s compensation.

**My Promise**

The following is something you could add to the inside of your brochure (preferably on the right-hand side).  It is a promise.  Include a head shot of yourself looking straight into the camera, positioned above the promise.  Also, add your signature on a slight angle below it. Few will actually read the promise word for word, but the message will be conveyed nonetheless.

*My Promise to You*

*Choosing the right contractor can be difficult.  Different contractors have varying qualifications, equipment, experience, work ethics and, yes, different pricing. One thing for sure is that your project requires experience and expertise. Ultimately, a successful project depends heavily on my own effort. If you honor me by permitting me to do your project, I guarantee that I will give you my very best effort.  This I promise you.*

**Certifications**

Use logos demonstrating third-party certification or qualifications, or relevant affiliates. They should go on the back of your brochure.

**Contact Information**

Your contact information should be one local phone number and one professional email address. Avoid toll- free numbers.  Customers will nearly always choose the local inspector with the local area code.  Customers want to talk to the actual contractor.  A toll-free number implies an impersonal, non-local, corporation who will send someone out.  A few very cheap customers dial toll-free numbers first to save a few pennies when buying a home.  Let your competitors have those customers.  Avoid filler words like *Call Today!*Every unnecessary thing you include diminishes the important points you are trying to convey.  And put your contact information at the bottom of your brochure.  Readers will first look for the phone number near the bottom.

**Company Name Placement**

Put your company name up at the top of the front of the brochure, not the bottom.  Brochure display holders often hide company names when they are placed

**Help Them Read**

People are accustomed to reading in lower case.  Using all capital letters is a mistake in that it makes it harder for the reader to recognize the words. All caps tend to be read letter-by-letter. When in doubt, avoid ALL CAPS.

**Fonts**

Avoid using many different font types, sizes and colors.  It diminishes the continuity of your brochure.  Stick to two fonts, one for headlines and one for the body text.  "Impact" fonts are best reserved for headings.  Impacts command attention, and they help the reader determine what is important.  Choose a Serif font for the body text.  Serifs exist for a purpose:  they help the reader’s eye pick up the shape of the letter.  Bolding or italicizing do not necessarily count as separate fonts.  However, only use them to add emphasis and clarity.  And never use comic fonts…you are a professional, not an entertainer.

**Spelling**

Check your spelling and grammar.  By the way, *piece of mind* is spelled *peace of mind*, and your automatic spellchecker won’t catch that one!

**Size Matters**

Size your brochure to fit in a #10 envelope.  You will want to be able to mail it and encourage others to mail it, so make sure it fits in a standard business envelope.  Besides, most brochure display holders are this size.

**Paper**

Use heavy cardstock.  Brochures printed on your home printer using 20-lb. paper look cheap and flop over in a display holder.  Cardstock is not expensive.  Gloss paper with bold colors creates an upscale image.  Plain copier paper creates a poor image.

**Ink**

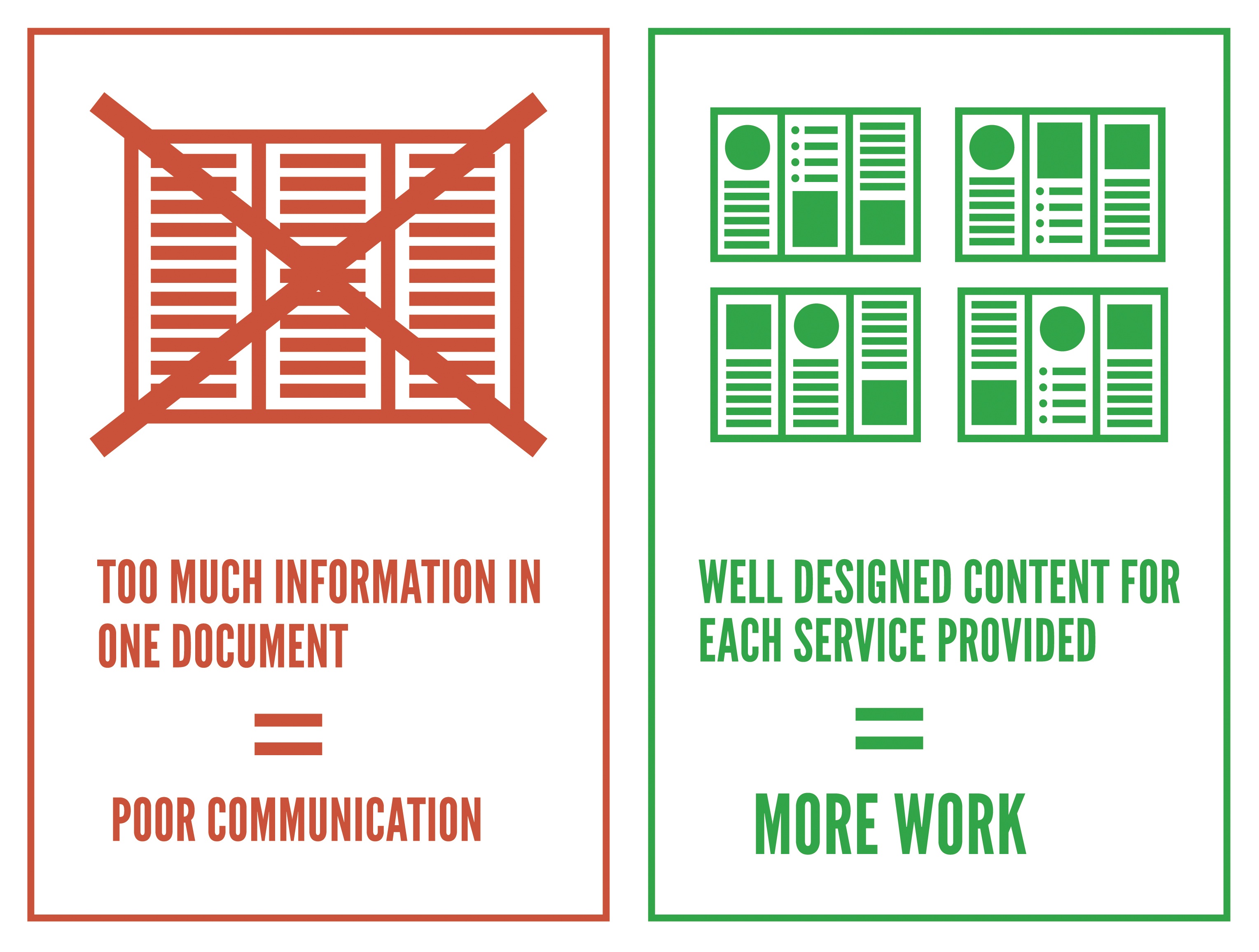
Avoid light-colored ink. It's simply hard to read.  Light- colored ink is difficult to copy and fax.  If your brochure has light-colored ink, try test-copying and faxing it to yourself to make sure it comes through.  Also, avoid reverse copy (white text on a dark color).

**Ownership**

If you are having your brochures printed professionally, make sure that, upon final payment, all film, color separations, artwork, etc., become your property.  This leaves you free to switch printing companies and keeps you from becoming a *captive customer.*

**More Than One Weapon**

Consider having a separate brochure for every target audience. Remember, your brochure is not likely to be read by the general public. Rather, it is intended for a targeted clientele.  Also, if you do create more than one version of your brochure, keep them all somewhat consistent-looking.



Tip: It costs the same to print a good brochure as it does to print a bad one. The only difference is results.

**How Many?**

If you are planning on having only 1,000 brochures printed, you are planning to fail.

**So Sad**

A contractor’s brochure, like all marketing, is a catalyst or a magnifier. If you offer a poor service, marketing will lead you to your demise quicker.  If you do good work, marketing will magnify it.  Your brochure is only second to YOU as the key ingredient in achieving success.  If you are a good contractor, you have an ethical duty to market so that more of your fellow citizens can learn about and benefit from your good work.  It is so sad to see a good contractor with a bad brochure.

**Websites**

To a potential client, your website is a sample of what you and your work are going to be like.  Your website is the flagship of your company. It makes little sense to drive traffic to a website that doesn’t represent you well.  The door to your website is your homepage.  It is the most important page of your website.  Most of your visitors will never even click through to your other pages if your homepage doesn’t make them want more.  As a contractor, you might work on some of the most expensive real estate in the world, but no home is as valuable, per square foot, as your own contracting website’s homepage.  The right homepage can generate you many thousands of dollars in contracting business, if it is designed correctly.  You only get one chance to make a good first impression.  Make sure your site doesn’t un-sell your contracting services.

**Don’t Be Shy**

If you are a good contractor, you have an ethical duty to market yourself and stay in business so as many of your fellow citizens as possible can use your services.  If you feel your clients who about to make the purchase of their lives are served well by hiring you… you shouldn’t pull any punches, either.  Marketing is no place for humility.  You are serving your clients by allowing them learn of, and benefit from, your good work.

**Your Website Isn’t About You**

Your website should be all about your prospects. Toward that end your website should be in 2nd person voice. That means that you should refer to your visitors as “you,” just like what you are reading here.

**Your Website Is Not a Brochure**

A company brochure is nothing more than a pompous business card.  Brochures are widely accepted as corporate propaganda.  Readers don’t expect to find much real information in them, so brochures are not really something a potential client is going to study with any seriousness.  You should consider yourself lucky to have a potential client even open your brochure.   However, Internet users are much more goal- driven.  They have clicked on your website for a specific reason -- not to just flip through the pages.  Therefore, your web developer has to predict what information these visitors are seeking and then quickly give it to them, or at least make the visitor believe they are just a click away from finding it.  A website is far more important to a contractor than a brochure.

**Your Website Is Not a TV**

There still exist some web developers who forget what the real purpose of a home contractor’s website is… to generate business for the contractor.  Some designs still include slow-loading graphics, a happy couple standing in front of their new home, virtual tours, and, of course, the obligatory tie-wearing, clipboard-holding, hardhat-wearing, smiling contractor.  These sites look great, but they generate very little contracting work for their owners.  Visitors are seeking information.  Your website’s job is to quickly make visitors believe that the information they're seeking is just a click away (at most), and then shape the delivery of that information such that it leads each visitor toward a decision to hire you for the project.  That’s it.  This isn’t art -- it's science.  There is a big difference between a professional-looking website and a pretty one. **Pretty websites only sell their developer’s services.**However, there is some correlation between clean, visual design and quality.

**Your Website Is Not a Magazine**

Your website is not a magazine, and your homepage is not a magazine cover.  The purpose of a magazine cover is to grab your attention so you pick up (or visit) the magazine.  However, there is no sense in trying to make your homepage grab attention, since no one can see it until after they choose to visit it anyway.  It is the links on your homepage leading the visitor toward a decision to hire you that must be the attention-grabbers.  A homepage cannot attract or send visitors to itself.

**Your Website Is Not a Building**

Your website is not a building, and your homepage is not a true "lobby".  Most websites have a homepage that acts as a lobby, directing traffic in different directions.  However, a contractor’s homepage should be a "trick lobby."  The signage (links) should appear to offer visitors directions to different departments.  But, in reality, they should merely take visitors through sales pitches that all lead back to making the visitor decide to hire you.  These departments (pages) are not destinations in and of themselves, but rather routes which you allow the visitor to pass through on his/her way to hiring you.  Common link titles that lead to such sales routes are: *"Reasons to Hire Me," "My Qualifications," “Look What I Can Do For You”* and "*My Promise to You*."

**Your Webpage is Not a Newspaper**

Your webpage is not a newspaper, and your homepage is not the newspaper’s daily headline.  A newspaper is expected to have fresh news every day, and readers revisit the same newspaper every day, rightly expecting to read something new.   However, your homepage is not going to be visited daily.  Very likely, you’ll get only one chance to say anything to a potential client with your homepage.  Forget about freshness.  People buy a house only once in seven years, on average.  Throw your same old, but best pitch, every time.

Furthermore, a newspaper’s format is recognized all over the world.  Readers all know that the sports scores and weather are on other pages within the newspaper.  This advantage permits newspaper publishers to dedicate their front pages to big headlines.  However, your visitors are not as convinced that what they seek exists within other pages of your website, so you will have to use part of your homepage to assure them.  For instance, if you specialize in certain contractor services, you will need to say so, on your homepage.  Little changes make all the difference.

**A Contractor’s Website Should Have Only One, Lone Goal**

A contractor’s website is not a brochure, not a TV, not a magazine, not a building, and not a newspaper.  Unlike many websites, it should not serve multiple purposes.  Don’t give your visitor any freedom to find anything but reasons to hire you.  You must have an understanding of who your visitors are and who among them are important -- who is likely to hire you.   A contractor’s website has only one purpose… to cause visitors to contact you to hire you (or at very least, contact you for a free estimate).

Because most people only use a contractor every several years, nearly all visitors to a contractor’s website are first-time visitors, and will likely never return again.  This is the main reason your homepage must use universally adopted conventions, which you must finely tweak and customize to suit your business.

**Your Website is a Series of Billboards**

No visitor reads all your website content.  They glance at your homepage, scan it, and make a crucial decision -- crucial to you, the contractor.  The decision they make is whether or not to click on anything on your homepage, or to exit and head for a competitor’s website.  There are only two ways to get them to choose to stay:

* Give them what they want quickly.  Unlike other industries that have to worry about fulfilling many visitors' multiple needs, your visitors have one basic need that you need to meet.  Immediately let them know that you have what they want, and that it is, at most, a click or two away.  This should be easy because contractors already know what their visitors want… to hire a good contractor.  So just give it to them.

OR

1. Give them something they weren’t originally seeking, but, rather, something that appears so enticing that they can’t help but click it.  An irresistibly titled link titled “*3 Mistakes Every Consumer Makes When Hiring a Contractor”* is an example of this strategy.

Omit needless words on your homepage.  This will make the pertinent words more prominent.  Your homepage is like a billboard that your visitors are whizzing by.  Give them only those words, which will cause them to hit their brakes.  **Stickiness begins with one click on the homepage***.* Yes, I know this sounds obvious, but your homepage must compel visitors to make that first click.

**Your Visitors Arrive with Baggage**

By the time most visitors arrive at your website, they will likely have experienced thousands of other sites and will expect yours to follow the same standard conventions.  Visitors expect your site design to follow common conventions.  To the extent that your web design veers from these internationally adopted conventions, your visitors will find it uncomfortable, assume your proposal will be similarly difficult to navigate, and, with a click of their mouse, leave.  Most visitors won’t drill down into your site if they don’t immediately find what they want, and find it where they expect it to be.  So, your site has to be smooth -- smooth in terms of meeting visitor expectations.  Forget about being creative.  Play the odds and appeal to the masses.  Let your competitor’s web developer be creative.  If you want to be an artist, go be one.  Many web developers should be on stage doing interpretive dances or pounding lumps of sculpture clay.  They have no business screwing up our website designs.  I once visited a contractor’s website where the links were all placed on different parts of a picture of a house.  It was cute, but almost impossible for a first-time visitor to navigate.  Conventions only become conventions under the force of natural selection.  In other words, they are conventions because they work.  Visitors get a reassuring sense of comfort from a website that doesn’t veer from standard conventions.  This sense of comfort earned by your website then transfers to their sense of you, the contractor.  Remember:  this is a science -- *and your business!* -- not an art.

**You Must Deny Your Visitors Their Freedom**

Within a second or two, some websites permit visitors to find they are looking for. They are everything to all visitors, and grant visitors the freedom to seek, and, more importantly, find, anything they might want.

Conversely, a contractor’s website must deny this freedom.  Every link on your homepage should lead to a page that starts with something relating to that respective link title (the "lead-in").  Then, every link from that page should link to a sales pitch for your services.  Then, every link from that page should lead to sales closings (reasons to contact you now).  Finally, every link from that page should lead to your contact information.  I love to link these pages with the one-way title “*Continue,*” as visitors have no business navigating themselves around.  Your site should covertly chauffeur your visitors.  Don’t worry --your visitors won’t ever figure out that they aren’t behind the wheel unless you give them a site map… so don’t.

Your website should have only one goal… to cause your visitor to hire you.  Like the former Soviet Union’s elections, where every candidate was a Communist, your visitors should also be free to choose any link that leads them toward a same end.  Your website is a funnel with visitors "freely" and unconsciously choosing to spiral down it.  You cannot afford to grant your visitors any real freedom.

Let your competitor build a website that provides visitors with real freedoms and lots of information.  You build a website that provides food for your family, one that will pry visitors away from their hard-earned money.  **Visitor freedom and sales are inversely related***.*  Grant your visitors the complete freedom to never choose incorrectly.

**How to Treat Visitors Seeking Something You Don’t Sell**

If your visitor wants something else, something you don’t sell, treat that visitor like a window-shopper instead of a potential customer.  Don’t let him cost you anything.  Let your competitors waste precious homepage real estate with stuff like “*Search the Web*” functions.   Design your site as if every visitor was there to hire you.

**Don’t Use Too Many Pics on Your Homepage**

People are naturally drawn to photos (pics), so if a pic does not tell a story that sells your contracting service… don’t use it.  An example of a pic that sells would be a shot of you (the contractor) working next to a piece of construction equipment with you company name on the equipment. This action shot of you would be a strong visual sales pitch that you might consider building your homepage around.

**Look in the Mirror**

You can’t judge a book by its cover, but many visitors will, so reconsider using your picture if you:

* look very overweight. It implies that you can’t do any work yourself.
* look very young. It implies that you are inexperienced.
* look like a mass-murderer.

If you are male and have a ponytail, hide it in the photograph. You want the reader to identify with you.  Keep your picture as simple as possible. Consider using digital airbrushing to touch up your picture.  Don’t wear a tie, except for maybe in *"My Promise"* (discussed later). This look is generally too professional and implies that you are so dressed up that you won’t take some jobs.  Also, don’t wear a t-shirt. This is too unprofessional.  You are a step above, hiring the work done by men in t-shirts.  Try to find a middle ground -- perhaps a nice collared shirt with the top button undone.

There is one additional pic, which may serve to increase sales.  That is a pic or a cutout of something -anything -- that conveys that you are locally owned and operated.  Use an image depicting the local sports team, a familiar town monument, or recognizable local geographic feature.  Visitors like to contact local contractors, which is why I’m also generally against toll-free numbers.  Local exchanges are much friendlier.  Anyway, a pic that shows you are a *local* is a fine addition to your homepage.

Fight the temptation to include most other pics on the homepage.  Other pics such as those of work in progress can go inside the site on their respective pages, but not on the homepage.  They will dilute your visitor’s attentiveness, which is so critical to sales.  Pics also slow download times.  **Pics distract visitors away from critical, interactive sales text, unfortunately.**

**Use High-Contrast Colors for Legibility**

Dark text on light background works best, especially since convention dictates blue for links.

**Scroll**

Avoid adding blank space between bodies of text or inserting blank lines between paragraphs if it looks like it might fall on the "fold" of the homepage.  Otherwise, a blank space might happen to land at the bottom of the visitor’s screen, making it appear to be the end of the text.  A continuous body of text will allow visitors to realize they should scroll to reach the end.

**Add Logos to the Very Bottom of Every Page.**

Use logos demonstrating third-party certification or qualification if you’ve earned them. They should go at the very bottom of every page.

*Licensed:*  The word "licensed," along with your state license number, should be included, and its inclusion may, in fact, be required in some jurisdictions.  However, consumers give you little credit for being licensed, as they know licensing is a bare minimum standard, and they assume that you are operating legally, even in states without licensing. Nevertheless, make it easy for a consumer to verify your licenses.

*Training Institute:*  Unfortunately, the schools or training institutes you attended can work against you a bit.  Schooling is sometimes associated with being a novice.  Use only their logo (if permitted).  Don't write out "graduated from..."  Your qualifications list (discussed later) is the better location for detailing your educational background.

**Your Company Logo**

Put your logo in the upper left-hand corner.  It should be bigger than anything else on the homepage, except maybe one main pic (described below).  100 pixels is about the max, though.   Avoid cartoons.  Cartoon graphics do not present a professional image.  No silly characters hammering on a house.  Would a professional engineer use cartoons?

There is an emerging convention that makes logos link to the homepage.  There is no harm in linking your logo to your homepage, but many users are not aware of this convention yet (so maybe I’m premature in calling it a convention).  Therefore, link your logo to your homepage if you wish, but not in place of having a link titled “homepage” on every page.  Every page should have a link titled “homepage.”

**Your Tagline**

This is the most important part of your homepage.  The main role of a tagline is to communicate what you do, quickly.  It is the sign over your store, and should be placed to the right of your logo.  A tagline is especially important to contracting companies that don’t have the word “contractor” in their company name.  For example:

A & B Enterprises, LLC

This company name doesn’t clearly convey what business they’re in.  Imagine seeing a sign for a store without knowing what it is they sell.  A tagline solves this problem.  See how much better the company name looks with a tagline under it:

A & B Enterprises, LLC

*Denver’s best contractor!*

I recommend that contractors italicize and punctuate their taglines as depicted.

**Fonts**

Avoid using many different fonts.  It diminishes the continuity of your website.  Stick to two fonts, one for headlines and one for the body text.  "Impact" fonts are best reserved for headings.  Impacts command attention, and they help the reader determine what is important.  Choose a Serif font like Verdana, Arial, or Helvetica for the body text.  Serifs exist for a purpose:  they help the reader’s eye pick up the shape of the letter.  Bolding or italicizing do not necessarily count as separate fonts.  The same thing goes for varying colors.  Use an alternate color to emphasize a word or set of words, but don't overdo it.  Use these techniques only to add emphasis and clarity.  And never use comic fonts…you are a professional, not an entertainer.

**Your Homepage Links Are an Advertisement, In and Of Themselves**

Because a homepage serves as the portal to the different areas of a site, homepages tend to have more links than other pages.  I like a wide border of navigational links.  However, be mindful that navigation facilitation is only a secondary purpose of contractor’s homepage.  The primary purpose is to sell your services.  Therefore, the links on your homepage should create an ad for your construction company, in and of themselves, even if your visitor never clicks any of them.  Compose your navigation links as if they weren't live links, but rather copy (the advertising industry's term for text within an ad).

**Left-Border Navigation vs. Top-Horizontal Navigation**

Most tests that have been conducted on this subject declare that navigational links are best placed vertically in the left border for left-to-right reading languages like English.  Visitors often suffer from banner blindness and so ignore anything horizontal at the top of a webpage.  Furthermore, vertical lists imply hierarchy, whereas horizontal tabs do not.  This hierarchy can be especially exploited by contractors' websites, which typically sell only one service, to compose a sort of ad made up of link titles.

**Distinguishing Your Homepage**

Unlike monster sites, where many millions of visitors arrive through pages other than the homepage, almost all your visitors will arrive at your website through your homepage.  Nevertheless, it should still be apparent to your visitors when they are on your homepage.  The best way to distinguish your homepage from other pages is with the word “*Welcome*.”  The word “*Welcome*” is universally used as a signpost for homepages.  This signpost will help ensure that visitors recognize their starting point, should they return to your homepage after exploring other pages of your website.

Don’t be compelled to offer a lengthy welcome message or *happy talk* that eats up prime homepage space.  The simple and lone word “*Welcome*” at the start of your homepage text is plenty.

Don’t make “*Welcome*” the first word in your window title, determined by the title tag of each HTML document, since titles play a critical role in search-engine bookmarking.  Use “*contractor*” or, better yet, your city name to exploit differentiating site information.  A good window title might be: *Boston’s best contractor.*

The whole purpose of your website is to get your phone to ring, so if you have both an email address and you answer your phone regularly, you might want to also turn “*Contact Me*” into a category titled “*Contact Me Now*” and put the actual contact information under it.  Also, if you are willing to answer your phone in the evening, say so in parentheses after your phone number.  This removes a visitor’s hesitation to call you late.  Note: This strategy works against you if you are seeking large contracts as a willingness to answer your phone late implies a one-man operation.

I also believe that a small percentage of visitors (mostly former clients) visit a contractor’s website for the sole purpose of looking up a familiar contractor's contact information.  Some clients who regularly used my contracting services for years never committed my phone number to memory and always went back online to retrieve it. Therefore, repeating your contact information again on the right side of your homepage, near the top, seems reasonable.  Furthermore, some clients referred to you only by company name may be visiting your site solely to retrieve your contact information to hire you.

I like each word of categories to be capitalized and sub-categories to be all lower-case, as this helps make clear the distinction between their relative importance.  All uppercase words are difficult to read.  However, if you are a contractor who has many qualifications, you might want to capitalize every letter in your “*MY QUALIFICATIONS*” link and/or make it bold font so as to draw attention.

There is a small percentage of visitors who, despite your “*MY QUALIFICATIONS*” being blue, underlined, and its own live link, will misinterpret it as a category title and everything under it as a subcategory and, therefore, not click on your “*MY QUALIFICATIONS*” link. Solve this problem by changing the order of your “*MY QUALIFICATIONS*” link and your “*Why Hire Me*” link (see above), and then listing the content from your qualifications page underneath the content on your “*Why Hire Me*” page, so that they get it either way.

I also like the "***MY QUALIFICATIONS***" link title to be bigger and bolder than the others, as if you were gloating with pride about it.  It is its own mini-ad.

Note: If you are seeking large projects, you should change “My Qualifications” to “Our Qualifications” so as not to imply that you are a small operation.

**Where Are We Taking Them?**

Your "*Homepage"* link takes your visitors to your homepage, of course.  Many web developers add extra code to prevent the homepage link from being live on the homepage itself.  Some even remove the homepage link from the border on the homepage since there is no reason to try to go to a page you are already on.  I think this is unnecessary code and may even cause rather than eliminate confusion.  Nowadays, Internet users are well aware that navigational links often include links to the very page they are on.

Your "*Services Offered"* link should take your visitor to a page which describes what you offer.

Your "*My Qualifications"* link should take your visitor to a page that lists every qualification you can come up with.  Make your list of qualifications as long as possible. Your list of qualifications can be broadened to include information such as your safety plan and schedule availability.  If you make the list long enough, no one will read it.  Your visitors will be impressed enough by its sheer length. **Only competitors read your webpage content; everyone else just scans it.**  Each qualification you have should be broken up and expanded as much as possible.

Deliver the message: *I am the quality contractor you want to hire.*     If you use sub-contractors to perform any portion of your work, include their qualifications.  For instance:  "*Wood infestation management performed by a licensed pest control subcontractor.* Again, make this list as long as possible. Even list the number of years you’ve worked with a particular subcontractor. Note: Don’t list the actual names of your subcontractors. You don’t want your clients or competitors contacting them directly.

Your "*Why Hire Me"* link should take visitors to a page that is similar to your *"Qualifications"* page, only backwards.  List the reasons to hire you first, followed by your formal qualifications.

Your "*My Qualifications"* page list and your "*Why Hire Me"* page list are really just the same list in reverse order.

Your "*Code of Ethics"* link should point to your Code of Ethics.

Your *“Look What I Can Do For You”*  link should take visitors to a page that has pictures of your work in progress and your finished projects.

Your "*My Promise* *to You*" link should take visitors to a page that has a promise and a pic of you.  Include a head shot of yourself looking straight into the camera, and position it above the promise.  Also, add your signature on a slight angle below it.  Few will actually read the promise word for word, but the message will be conveyed nonetheless.

*My Promise to You*

*Choosing the right contractor can be difficult.  Different contractors have varying qualifications, equipment, experience, work ethics and, yes, different pricing. One thing for sure is that your project requires experience and expertise. Ultimately, a successful project depends heavily on my own effort. If you honor me by permitting me to do your project, I guarantee that I will give you my very best effort.  This I promise you.*

*John Smith  ABC Contracting*

Your "*Contact Me Now*" information is obvious.   None of this debbieandbobgonefishin4321@aol.com stuff though. Make your email easy to spell and professional looking. And don’t use forms of course. No one wants to fill out a form to contact you. They want to email or call you.

Your “Click Here for a Free Estimate” button should link to a page that instructs them to contact you for a free estimate. The bottom of that page should obviously contain your contact information in the manner you want potential customers to contact you (I recommend phone and email).

If you get busy and can’t handle all the free estimate requests coming in, you can stop making it so easy to request one by temporarily hiding the button so that only potential consumers who really want an estimate contact you using your contact page.

This leads us to the length of the text on the pages that the navigation links point to.  The answer is "short."  Even if you have a lot to say, don’t say it without offering the visitor a chance to shut you up with cash.  For example, let’s say you have a link titled *“Radon Mitigation.”  It* may be tempting to put all sorts of scientific definitions of radon, the history of radon, graphs alerting visitors to the cancer risks that high radon levels pose, etc., but refrain.  Instead, have the link go to a short radon page which quickly describes why testing for radon is important, why your form of mitigation is the best, and how to contact you to order the installation of a mitigation system.  If you are worried your sales pitch on this short radon page doesn’t satisfy overly inquisitive visitors, simply add a “*More About Radon*” link at the bottom of your short radon page that contains everything anyone would ever want to know about radon, and then some.  Include all the information you can on this page.  Make it all one long page, and feel free to make it as long as you like, with pics.   However, have this long "*more"* page periodically offer to bring the visitor back to your short radon page with “*Back*” links.  Let your visitors decide for themselves when they’ve been sold.

**Avoid Naming Links *“Click Here”***

Never title a link “*Click Here*.”  Instead, tell the visitors what they get when they click the link.  For example, rather than saying: “*Click Here for my Code of Ethics,*” just title the link “*Code of Ethics*” or “*My Code of Ethics*.”

**Avoid Naming Links *“More”***

Rather than having a link titled “*More*” at the end of a list, tell the visitor what there is more of, for example: “*More references and testimonies from my past clients*.”

**Don’t Change Your Links' Colors Once Visited**

Most websites have links that change colors once visited to keep a visitor from revisiting a page.  However, assuming every page of your website is designed to sell your services, I see no reason to stop a potential customer from reading anything twice.  Therefore, if possible, remove the code that provides this courtesy to your visitors so that all your links remain underlined and blue, even after being visited.

**Don’t Choose Icons or Buttons Over Simple Text Links**

Nearly all visitors to a home contractor’s website are first-time visitors.  First-time visitors can read a word faster than they discern what an icon means.  Don't make them interpret icons (other than, maybe, a well- recognized one, like a printer icon).  Use text-only links.

**Don’t Let Them Off The Ranch**

Keep links to outside websites to an absolute minimum. Outside websites often move or disappear. It is better to rebuild content on a page on your website and link to that page. If you simply must link to an outside website, have the link open in a new window so that the visitor returns to your site.

**Don’t Live-Link any Graphics**

If a visitor’s pointer changes over a graphic, indicating a live link, the visitor will often check every other graphic for live links.  This is a distraction.

**You’re Not Fooling Anyone.**

Don’t offer a downloadable discount coupon.  Such built-in coupons are a silly way of simply charging less, and everyone knows it.  Something available to everyone is worthless.  You might get away with it if you announce that it's exclusive and *only available on this website till the end of the month* or something similar.

For simple services that don’t require an on-site estimate, avoid complicated or ambiguous pricing formulas or charts. Instead, keep your price structure straightforward and respectably high.

**Nothing Says *Quality* Louder**

If your pricing is much higher than you competitors, flaunt it.  High pricing is the sure-fire way to convince a customer that you are one of the best.  Americans believe that you get what you pay for.  If your website is making the contention that you are the best contractor in town, your pricing has to support this contention.  Charging too little contradicts this claim.

**Noise**

Don’t use watermarks, background images or wallpaper.  They add clutter, decrease visibility, slow download time, and are merely decorative.  Some tasteful exceptions exist, but those are few.

**Don’t Offer a "Search" Feature**

Don’t grant your visitor any real freedom to search your site, or, worse, the entire Web from your website.  Don't let them wander to weather forecasts or stock quotes.  The goal of your website is to lead the visitor toward a decision to hire you.  Your website does not exist to provide your visitors with any distracting conveniences or information other than that which you want them to have, in the order you want them to get it.

**Don’t Offer to Ship Visitors Anything**

You shouldn't offer some trinket or costly book to your visitors in the hope that they’ll give you their address, in the hope that you can ship them something, in the hope that it will arrive before they hire a contractor, or in the hope that, upon receipt, they’ll hire you.  *Forget about it.*  It is better to ask for their email address.  Besides, all visitors are justifiably hesitant to give up their actual home addresses, but have no problem giving up their email addresses.  So, if you get their email address, use it!  Email them something every day, forever, or until they scream *Stop!* Work every lead to death or until that lead turns into a scheduled project.  The top real estate agents will often work leads for years until those leads produce.  We can learn something from these agents.

**Help Wanted = Poor Service**

Never use your website to advertise employment opportunities.  It gives the impression that you are short-handed, or that you might send an inexperienced employee to your client's job site.  Reserve your contracting website for only one thing… to convince visitors to hire you.

**Don’t Turn Your Site Into Craigslist**

Never use your website to sell left-over building material. It gives the impression that you are getting paid twice for material. Reserve your contracting website for only one thing… to convince visitors to hire you.

**Forget About Online Booking**

Any hint of online booking, even posting your schedule on an online calendar, will deter sales.  It may be cute, but there is a reason real salespeople are employed all over the world.  Answer your phone.

**Don't Yell!**

There is no reason to use exclamation marks on your homepage, ever.  Never yell at your visitors!

**Act Like You’ve Been in the End Zone Before**

Avoid giving the impression that you are new to the business…even if you are.  Don’t put anything on your website that would reveal your inexperience.  Kiss-of-death terms include: *Just-licensed*, *Grand opening*, *Recent graduate*, *Introductory offer*, and the mother of all kiss-of-death terms:  *New to the business*.

**Don't Misppel**

Because contractors are in the “perfection” business, it is important to check and double-check for typos and broken links.

**Don't Pollute**

Your site should not contain any slow loading intros, ads, pop-up windows, rollovers, pull-downs, music, animation, Flash, banners, things that move content, things that blink, things that make sounds and instructions.  Yes, instructions.  If you have to include long instructions, even for downloading a document, you are doing something wrong.   Don’t make your visitors think.

**Add *How-To* Articles**

These articles are great for search engine optimization and demonstrate to consumers how much work is involved in their project. Don’t use articles that make a project look simple to complete. Add enough specialized articles to let a prospective client that you have awareness or expertise in an area that your competition lacks.

**Add the Agreement Between You and Your Client**

Some contractors argue that displaying your standard agreement (or contract) between you and your client on your website might be useful in defending the charge that your client "didn't have time to read it" on-site.  You can use a link titled “Please read our standard contract” for this purpose.

**Add Testimonials**

Ask every client for a letter of reference.  I used to send them a postage-paid envelope and a letter asking them to scribble me a reference letter.  I found that you get more replies if you permit them to scribble.  After you accumulate at least 20, you can put them on a page and link to it.  No visitor will really read that many, but they might just check to see how many you have, so wait until you collect a bunch.

**Actual Pics of Your Clients**

Consider asking for permission to take and use actual photos of your clients. You can place these above each of their testimonials. This will give the testimonial credence. Make sure your client is smiling in the pic.

**Add *Before and After* Pics**

Ask every client if you can put before and after pictures of their project on your website. You may also want to put up a series of project progress pictures. Get permission to use full names and city. First-name-only testimonials are worthless.

**YouTube**

Google owns YouTube and so gives YouTube clear preference in its organic search results. It is not unusual to see a new YouTube video outrank a website that has been up for years.

Making a video or even a series of videos using nothing more than your laptop’s webcam is fairly simple. You could even use a YouTube video to show potential clients the progress of a project. Remember to mention your web address throughout any videos you produce. You can put a video up on YouTube and easily embed it on your website.

**Website Design is Only One-Third of the Equation**

For example, if your website is getting 500 hits a month, and of those hits, 3% contact you (attributable to website design), and of those that contact you, one-third schedule projects, then you are getting 5 jobs a month from your website, which can be translated mathematically as  500 x 0.03 x 0.33 = 5.  However, if you can double all three factors in the equation so that you are getting 1,000 hits a month, 6% are contacting you, and you are converting two-thirds of those contacts into scheduled projects, then you far more than doubled your results as 1,000 x 0.06 x 0.67 = 40 extra jobs a month!  Each factor counts.  Do the math and make sure your website is not the weak link in your formula for success.

**Test Drive**

Have someone test drive your website. Tell them to talk out loud as they move about your site, describing what they are looking for and what they are noticing.

**Brutal Truth**

The total number of projects to be performed in the world is a constant; you aren’t going to single-handedly change your local economy.  So every job counts.  Furthermore, every job you get is one your competitor doesn’t.  Like I said, the total number of projects is a constant.  Make sure you are doing everything you can to get your share of the pie.

**Search Engine Optimization Tips**

First, make sure the privacy settings of your website allow it to be visible to everyone.

**Add Your Local Market Region to Every Page**

Using IP addresses, Google knows where their users are searching from and customizes their search results accordingly. Therefore, it is important that Google knows where your market area is.

Put your address, market suburbs, market subregions, satellite cities, and metro areas on every page of your website. If you serve more than one town or city, include them all. Even better, add geographically-specific phrases about your market area within your website text.

**Mention What Special Services You Offer Often**

Include the ancillary service you offer in the first few sentences of every paragraph and then try to work it into every other paragraph at least.

**Google AdWords**

Google AdWord campaigns can be an inexpensive and effective customer acquisition strategy. The concept behind AdWords is that you bid on keywords in an effort to have your ad appear. The goal is not to generate traffic to your website, but rather generate traffic from visitors who are likely to want your contracting services.

Here is a list of suggested keywords:

* Your City or Town
* The regional areas within your market
* Your Name (to help searchers who know your name find you)
* Your Company Name (to help searchers who know your company name find you)
* All your Services (or at least the ones you want to sell the most)

**Google Analytics**

Sign up for Google Analytics. It is free. Google Analytics provides you with statistics about your visitors including what sites referred them, what city they are from, what search phrases they used to find you, and much more.

**Website and Email Legal Issues for Contractors**

The Internet has created tremendous opportunities for marketing your business, but it has also created new legal traps for the unwary.  Here are five considerations contractors should bear in mind when building and adding to their business websites.

1. **Jurisdiction.** This is important if you live close to a state line and routinely offer or provide services across state lines.  Generally, a court cannot exercise jurisdiction over a resident or company in another state unless that person or entity does business in that state.  If your website attracts potential customers from another state, you want to make sure that if that out-of-state customer sues you, he must do it in your state – not his.  In other words, you want the “home-field advantage.”  For this reason, you should consider posting something like this on your home page:

*This site provides general information about our services and qualifications.  By using this site, you agree that our maintenance of this site does not constitute the transaction of business in any state other than [Your State].*

1. **Protecting Copyrights and Trademarks**. Many people do not realize that to copyright something, all you must do is put the public on notice of your claim by including the copyright symbol © on your work.  Similarly, to trademark something, all you must do is put the public on notice by use of the ™ symbol.  You do not have to file any documents with the government; you only have to do that if you want to register your copyright or if you want to apply for a registered trademark so that you can use the ® symbol with your trademark.  Registration does offer some advantages if you end up in litigation, but it is not mandatory.  Your website may contain photos, drawings, and/or wording that you worked hard to create.  You should protect these things by placing a notice on your home page, such as this:

*This website and its entire contents are copyrighted [Year] by [Your Company].*

Or even:

*© [Year] [Name]*

Note that three elements must be included in your copyright notation in order to make it legally enforceable: 

* your name or your company name;
* the copyright symbol or the word "copyright"; and
* the year of copyright.

1. **Other People Protecting Their Copyrights and Trademarks**

* Do not copy photos, drawings or language from other websites or sources that are copyrighted without permission.  Most people never get caught, but if you do, you will pay thousands of dollars to defend and/or or settle a lawsuit.
* Do not create a trademark that is so similar to a competitor’s trademark that it is likely to cause confusion to the public.
* Do not use the ® symbol unless the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) has issued you a Certificate of Registration for your trademark.

1. **Your Website as Evidence Against You**. One of the first things we attorneys do when deciding whether to sue on behalf of a client is to visit the defendant’s website.  We often find language that we will able to use against the defendant if we file suit.  View your website with a critical eye.  Does your website make promises that you cannot keep or claims you cannot prove?  For instance, if your website claims that your company is “The Most Experienced Contractor in Colorado,” you had better have some data to back that up; if you do not, some plaintiff’s attorney may make you eat those words in court some day.
2. **Privacy Issues.**  Websites are great because they allow you to collect the email addresses of visitors, and that information becomes more valuable as that list grows.   However, if you use that list to send commercial emails to others, you must comply with the federal CAN-SPAM Act.

A “commercial email” is defined as “any electronic mail message, the primary purpose of which is the commercial advertisement or promotion of a commercial product or service.”  All commercial emails must include:

* a legitimate return email address and a physical address;
* a clear and conspicuous notice of the recipient’s opportunity to “opt out”;
* a mechanism that must be provided or an email address to which a recipient may send a message to opt out; and
* a clear and conspicuous notice that the message is an advertisement or solicitation.

The “existing business relationship” exception under the federal anti-fax law DOES NOT APPLY to commercial emails, so even if you have a prior relationship with the recipient, you must still comply with the Act. 

**Your Work Vehicle**

Reliable, respectable transportation is essential for the contractor. Purchasing the right work vehicle to carry equipment, as well as doubling as a mobile office, is becoming somewhat easier, ironically, as the American car industry is suffering through tough economic times.  Securing the most favorable commercial truck loan will get the contractor on the road more quickly.

Many commercial lenders will smooth the way for borrowers whose business credit has yet to be firmly established, or whose credit may be damaged, by offering flexible loan options, as well as holding the title to the vehicle as collateral.  Many heavy-duty truck manufacturers, such as Kenworth, GMC and Peterbilt, work with commercial lenders to offer pre-owned vehicles and special financing.

While it’s tempting for the contractor to find the biggest and most flashy vehicle he or she can possibly afford, it’s important to be realistic and think long-term about one of the largest and most expensive equipment investments tied to his business.  The right truck can cost anywhere from a modestly priced $20,000 vehicle to something costing nearly six figures.  So, consider the following:

* Will this vehicle be used mainly for business, or will it double as the primary vehicle for the owner and possibly the family, too?  Either scenario will affect both business taxes and insurance rates, so it’s important to decide, before purchasing, how the vehicle will be used on a daily basis.
* As fuel costs continue to remain high, with only occasional, temporary dips, consider both the type of fuel you want to use and the average miles per day you will probably add to the odometer.  Diesel, ethanol and hybrid options will influence your operating costs down the line, as well as your purchasing decision up front.  Research these options carefully, and don’t dismiss newer technologies just because they’re unfamiliar.
* New or used?  Your credit rating, financing options and personal preference will all factor into which part of the car lot you’ll be shopping in, either on site or on the Internet.  Consider the safety features and special extras in newer vehicles (such as GPS navigation, storage, plug-ins for laptops and cell phones, etc.) that will keep you roadworthy for years to come.  Some of these newer vehicles may have been recently repossessed and will qualify as pre-owned for a lower sticker price and easier financing.
* Shopping for the right loan is as important as shopping for the right truck.  Affordability is affected not just by how much the bank is willing to lend you, but by whether you can maintain the monthly payments.  The percentage rate and loan structure are critical in determining whether you can afford the vehicle of your choice.  Remember that if you default on your truck loan, not only will its repossession damage your credit rating, but it will also damage your ability to conduct your day-to-day business.  Make sure you consider the monthly amortization schedule of your loan, and bargain for the best option that dovetails with your expected business revenue.  If you have a balloon payment due during a slow season, renegotiate with your lender before signing any documents.  Many online lenders have streamlined the loan process, and many dealers offer the same sort of convenience.  Make them compete for your business by taking time to research your best long-term options.
* Another loan option includes leasing rather than purchasing your service vehicle.  The primary feature of a lease is that the dealer is responsible for maintenance, and you can upgrade at the end of the term.  But for commercial vehicles, the more attractive plus is that if the vehicle is used strictly for business, the monthly payments are tax-deductible.  Other advantages of leasing include a usually favorable purchase price or buyout at the lease’s termination, or leasing another, newer vehicle, possibly with updated features and improved fuel efficiency – another smart move for any small business owner.

Purchasing a new or new-to-you work vehicle is a stressful as well as exciting decision, so mitigate that built-in anxiety by doing your homework and considering all your options before committing to a new rig for the road.

Tip: Whenever possible, have material delivered. The less your employees are on the road in your vehicles, the less they are wearing out those vehicles and the less chance that they’ll be involved in an accident.

**Truck Signage**

A study by American Trucking Associations, Inc. showed that a truck sign creates almost 5 million visual impressions a year.   For contractors located in major cities, their driver’s-side signage may be seen up to 44,000 times per day.  Truck ads are the oldest form of mobile advertising still used today, dating back to 1912 when delivery trucks needed to distinguish themselves in New York City.  Every contractor should invest in truck signage to advertise his/her contracting business.  Given the massive exposure gained just by driving around, it really is a marketing no-brainer.

Good vehicle signage promotes your brand.  Truck signage is the easiest marketing you can do all day without having to lift a finger.  It works while you’re working.  The larger your service area, the more people will see it.  The smaller your service area, the more people will recognize it and become familiar with it, along with the services it advertises.  Truck signage demonstrates that you’re a professional.  When you have truck signage, you carry your branding with you to every job, every day.

Truck signs are especially important in jurisdictions that restrict the use of yard signs.  Mobile signage goes where you go, and the design options are virtually unlimited.

Some contractors (especially multi-vehicle firms) have their vehicles professionally painted.  A newer innovation is custom vinyl applications that are semi-permanent.  These are the ultimate marketing tools for dedicated work vehicles, and even for vehicles that do double-duty as a family vehicle.  Some may find painting cost-prohibitive, or just enjoy the flexibility of having top-quality magnetic signage to use on different vehicles or upgrades without having to have a new vehicle repainted.  With the improved variety and quality of magnetic signage available now, it’s an economical alternative to having your information professionally painted on your truck.  Because they’re sturdy, weatherproof, and can be exactly replicated again and again as necessary, magnetic signs are a sound investment in your business marketing that will recoup the expense in drive-by advertising, which is a unique method that all contractors should take advantage of.

**Go with Quality or Don’t Go At All**

Make sure that your sign is high quality.  Whether you opt for permanent paint or the magnetic type, a cheap sign—or, worse, a homemade one—can do more damage to your professional reputation than not having any type of mobile marketing at all.  Your signage should be professionally executed, and not by your neighbor’s kid who loves to draw.  Effective marketing materials are not only impeccably rendered, but they also follow certain principles of design, which is a big reason that InterNACHI has invested in a professionally-trained marketing design staff to serve its membership.  You do not want to go the DIY route for truck signage.  What may appeal to the individual contractor may make a poor sign that most viewers will struggle to make sense of quickly in traffic.  That includes proper spelling, grammar, punctuation and capitalizations, too.

**Use Your Truck as a Billboard, Not as a Brochure**

Your sign should include your company name, your logo, your phone number, your web address, and, optionally, your general service area, along with a brief and simple list of the services you offer.  Some contractors may insist on including “Licensed & Insured,” which is another indication of legitimacy and professionalism, especially in jurisdictions that regulate contractors.

However, resist the temptation to include everything but the kitchen sink.  Don’t cram a lot of details in your sign, such as your qualifications or an exhaustive list of your ancillary contracting services.  Also, unless you have a short and snappy tagline, you may want to omit that, too.  You have to make your impression quickly, so, unlike a business brochure, less is more for vehicle signage.  For all these considerations that need to strike the right balance between visual appeal and information, it’s best to have your sign professionally designed.

**Make the Most of Your Mobile Billboard**

Since magnetic signs are affordable and easily transferrable, consider purchasing two signs:  one for the driver’s side and one for the passenger side.  That effectively doubles your exposure.  And don’t neglect the tailgate of your truck.  The smaller area may require a specialized sign that’s different from your main sign, but contractors should take advantage of drivers stopped behind them in traffic who will have ample time to read the signage.  This can increase your business’ visibility by more than 60%.

**Some Do’s and Don’ts for Work Vehicles**

**Do:**

* Make sure your vehicle is clean inside and out before your first appointment of the day.  Many contractors wash their vehicles first thing in the morning.
* Check every day that your magnetic signage is secure and properly positioned, or you'll give the impression that you're a fly-by-night operation.
* Be a courteous and conservative driver.  Don’t speed or tailgate such that other drivers may find your driving aggressive.  Since you’ll have your contact information splashed all over your vehicle, you may create negative consequences with your driving that will hurt you personally and professionally—and possibly legally, as well.

**Don’t:**

* use your vehicle for personal expressions that evoke politics, religion or humor, or identify you with non-professional associations that may have controversial reputations.  Avoid (most) bumper stickers, novelty items hanging from the trailer hitch or sitting on your dashboard or attached to your antenna, as well as questionable images on mud flaps, and flags that are not state flags or the U.S. flag.  It’s simply not appropriate to display such items at your workplace—or your workplace on wheels—and doing so may create unwanted notions about you and your work ethic and unnecessarily alienate potential clients.  Can you afford to say no to new business?  Just as I advise contractors to use discretion and good judgment in choosing their work wardrobe by avoiding t-shirts and hats emblazoned with logos, images, jokes and text that some may find offensive or which may be misunderstood, the same advice holds true for your work vehicle.  Err on the conservative side by sticking to business; your no-nonsense approach will be appreciated by your clients.
* neglect to keep the interior (as well as the exterior) of your vehicle clean.  You may have to eat three meals a day inside your truck while you juggle a hectic schedule, but police your mess as you go and keep your vehicle tidy.  Your clients may notice your messy vehicle and, fairly or not, they will likely form opinions about you and your work habits based on both your appearance and that of your vehicle.  It’s unavoidable because it’s human nature, so do what you can to make a good impression throughout the day.

Remember that in everything you do in your workday, you are representing your business, so make the most of it by marketing wherever you go and invest in truck signage.  You’ll be surprised at how effective it can be.

**Dr. Frankenstein’s Ad for Contractors**

Some print ads un-sell contractors:

* A horrible logo (often by connecting their initials).
* A disgusting color scheme.
* Five or six different fonts.
* A silly pun (as if consumers demand witty contractors).
* A picture of a service fleet (as if that is going to make someone want them).
* Technical buzzwords (did I really wonder about that before you told me?).
* Weak premise (like “Here’s a great deal!”)
* No attention-grabbing, compelling headline.
* No solution proposal.
* No list of features and benefits.
* No sense of urgency (“Please call us sometime”).
* No call to action.

**Home Show and Trade Expos**

Contractors who find themselves between projects should consider investing some time in manning a table at a trade show. The opportunities to do so are frequent—they include luxury home tours, garden shows, building and home supply events, and real estate functions. Prospective homeowners who are considering a new build generally take the time to gather ideas for architectural choices, housing plans and layouts, and interior and exterior materials, especially features that are newer, innovative, and save energy. Essentially, these potential clients are pre-house shopping for concepts that reflect their dream for creating a unique home that meets their space and comfort needs, as well as their desire to save energy and have a lower impact on the environment. Contractors should take advantage of these events for their built-in marketing opportunities because a trade show provides the chance to do live advertising, where you sell yourself and your business ethic as much as sell your product and services.

**Do’ s:**

* Prepare: It goes without saying that your website and hard-copy marketing materials should be professionally designed, as well as regularly maintained and updated. This is the source material that you will be directing your booth visitors to and the product that you’re giving them now. If you’ve successfully engaged these people, they’re going to pore over your brochure and visit your website once they get home, so make sure everything is in top condition beforehand. That includes testing your website’s links and navigation to make sure there aren’t any glitches that need intervention. Whether you have an event lined up or are considering participating in one for the first time, always have a trade show kit that is ready to go. Preparing ahead of time will virtually guarantee a productive experience, even if you don’t nail any new clients.
* Pre-promote: Always let your former clients and prospects know you’ll have a booth at an upcoming event. An event is the perfect excuse for a local press release.
* Invest in high quality images for your booth. Don’t be cheap. “Go big or go home”—this conventional wisdom cannot be denied. Especially if you have reached the midpoint in your career, you want to meet your market’s needs by offering quality instead of merely economy. This means providing materials and services that are more expensive than that of your usual competitors. Your sales pitch and your trade show display should reflect that. Invest in durable, high-quality signage and displays. For outdoor events, have a sturdy table, a chair for yourself, and two chairs for visitors who will be glad to take a load off and, consequently, will be more receptive to your message. Also for primarily outdoor use, invest in a customized tent that provides shade, a bit of quiet and privacy, especially at events that are noisy and get a lot of foot traffic. Put your name and logo on everything.
* Use a headline that attracts attention. Wear proper attire, appropriate for the event. Shirts should display your company logo.
* Open the conversation by saying “What attracted you to our booth?”
* Have informational materials and samples to hand out.
* Get out in the aisle and engage people with your give aways.
* Use a prepared script to speak to prospects that stop by.
* Be enthusiastic in speaking to everyone
* Open the conversation by saying “What attracted you to our booth?
* Schedule an initial meeting at the show.
* Have 2 people at the booth at all times.
* Have a snack or drink give – bottled water for example.
* Send follow-up pieces to everyone that gives you their contact info.
* Use large flat screen monitors to display interesting video or slide shows.

**Don’ts:**

* Don’t agree to sponsor an event (for a fee) unless you can man the table or have someone man it for you. You’d essentially be paying rent for table space for a stack of your brochures, and that’s not the wisest investment of your marketing budget.
* Use your company name as the headline for the booth unless it clearly reflects what you do.
* Display old or outdated images or use old brochures or other dated collateral.
* Say “Hi, can I help you?”
* Sit.
* Act bored.
* Eat food at your booth.
* Don’t limit your event choices. Think of other events where your direct completion will be less. Consider events your desired prospects are likely to attend: ones that may exist slightly outside the traditional market. Are affluent prospects at boat shows, auto shows, and other events and exhibits that feature high-ticket purchases and luxury goods? Will they be at energy symposiums, sustainable-living fairs, alternative building fairs, and community—rather than strictly home shows?

After each event—even before you’ve replenished your supply of brochures and business cards—do a post-game decompression. Take some time to reflect and write down what went well and what didn’t. This is especially essential if you had a representative at the show in your place. Figure out what you (and/or your rep) can do better next time, whether it’s being better prepared with information for certain questions, deciding to offer some new or different freebies (which, of course, should have your logo and contact information on them), whether you should have had refreshments (or different ones) available for your visitors (and your staff or yourself), or whether you had any issues with the venue’s facilities or staff that will inform your future requests for other shows. An indispensable skill of being a good marketer for your business is to ask for and process feedback, so make a thorough self-assessment after each event in preparation for the next one. Make your time and effort count. This will boost your confidence, as well as keep you realistic about how effectively you’re marketing your business live.

**Customized Articles**

Articles that are informational and educational are a great way to promote your company and generate sales leads. They're useful for homeowners and others with an interest in issues related to the services you offer.

Common uses for customized articles include:

* contractor websites (improves search-engine optimization);
* contractor newsletters (great to email to real estate agents and past clients);
* contractor special reports (include appropriate articles for particular issues); and
* trade show handouts (make copies with your contact information on them).

You may also want to have your articles translated into other language.

**Special Reports**

Special reports are similar to articles, but are particularly timely or relevant to potential customers in a certain geographic area. For example: If your local building department adopts a code change, you might want to inform potential clients about it using a special report that also promotes your contracting company or announces a new service you offer.

**Marketing on Message Boards and Online Forums**

Are you taking advantage of message boards and online forums to help market your contracting business?  Consumers and real estate agents searching online for specific construction topics often find message board threads and, thus, the contractors contributing to those threads.  Some contractors report getting substantial portions of their work from online message boards. Here are some tips for getting the most marketing value out of them:

* Contribute often.  The more posts you author, the more likely you will be found.
* Make real, substantive posts that search engines can find and that potential clients will find useful.
* If you are an expert in a particular area of construction area, make very detailed, helpful posts regarding your areas of expertise; and start new threads about those issues.
* Be conscious about what you say online. Search engines such as Google can probably see and will index your comments. So, your strategy should be to keep non-construction-related discussions (especially religious and political discussions) in non-public areas and post technical discussions in appropriate and open forums.
* Add a link to your contracting business' website to the signature of your posts.
* Add your contracting business' telephone number to your signature.
* Add your city to your signature, i.e., *Serving Columbus, Ohio*, or, even better:  *Providing contracting services throughout Columbus, Ohio*. It helps search engines index your inspection business' website.

**Online Videos**

Making an online video, commercial, or even a series of shows using nothing more than your laptop’s webcam is fairly simple. You could even use a YouTube video to show potential clients the progress of a project. Remember to mention your web address throughout any videos you produce.

A contractor should always know how to present him or herself professionally to clients, real estate agents, et cetera.  But sometimes, when the camera turns on, even a confident home contractor can lose his or her composure and come off as uncomfortable, unsure and maybe even unqualified. Here are some tips to help you look good in front of a camera.  Many of them can also help you interact with people on the job.

* Try to **write a basic script** beforehand, so you have a general idea of what you want to say during your commercial.  The more comfortable you are with the material, the better it will sound when recorded.
* If you have a camcorder (or even a cell phone with video capabilities) take some time to **practice being on camera**.  We typically look and sound different when recorded, and getting comfortable with those differences before your shoot will translate to a better commercial.  If you don't have a camcorder, practicing in front of a mirror is very similar.
* When dressing for your commercial, **avoid wearing green**.  You may want to use a green screen to superimpose your video on to a different background.  If you're wearing clothes that are similar to the color of a green screen, it will be hard for the editor to remove the screen without also removing part of your body.  You should also avoid wearing stripes (particularly tight ones), bright red, or all white/black as these generally look bad on screen.
* **Get a haircut** a few days before the shoot, and consider having your **clothes professionally cleaned and pressed**.  You want to look as professional as possible and having wrinkle-free clothes and a fresh haircut can do wonders.  Also, if you are a man, shave as close to the shoot as possible (you might even want to consider bringing your razor to the shoot and shaving there).
* Actors, actresses, singers and other performers often do **vocal warm ups** before a show.  As silly as this may feel, having a confident and commanding voice can really help you connect with your commercial's viewers.  It doesn't need to be much: clear your throat, open and close your mouth a few times, and maybe try a few tongue twisters from your childhood.  What's most important is that you prepare yourself to speak clearly and with confidence.
* During the shoot, try to **avoid nervous stops and starts** like "um" or "uh" (or for those younger contractors, "like").  It's OK to have a short pause in your speech.  In fact, it will often help your audience by giving them a moment to more fully take in your last sentence.  On the other hand, if you find yourself very comfortable speaking on camera, avoid rambling.  You want to be clear and concise without your speech being stop-and-go.
* The camera will tend to cloak subtle movements and weaken posture.  You will have to go a little bit over-the-top for things to look right on film.  Be sure to stand tall with your shoulders back.  Plant both feet solidly on the ground, and avoid rocking from one side to the other.  If you don't know what to do with your hands, try holding a tool that you use during an project (such as a clipboard, PDA, or some safety gear) or standing with your hands behind your back (similar to the military parade rest position).  Don't lean on the set.  Be expressive in your movements when they're intentional, and avoid nervous movement such as tapping your feet, rocking, or fussing with a prop.  In general, try to **be confident in your stance** like you are confident in your contracting abilities.
* **Eye contact** is important, even when you're looking at the lens of a camera.  Look directly at the camera to show that you are engaged and ready to demonstrate your prowess as a contractor.  Try not to look down between sentences (unless you're reading from a script) as this can convey shyness and a lack of confidence.
* **Smile!**  Remember, your clients want to feel like they can trust you and be comfortable asking you questions about their project.  If you are relaxed, comfortable and happy, your potential clients will be relaxed, comfortable and happy while watching your commercial.
* In the end, the most important thing is to **be you**.  These tips should help you prepare, but if you over-think things you might start second-guessing every word and every movement you make on camera.  Before your shoot, take a moment to remind yourself that you're a great, professional contractor and that people ought to hire you.  Take a deep breath, smile, and say, "take one."

**Networking**

Whenever you meet someone, always try to find a point in the conversation where you can tell him or her what you do for a living, and give him or her your business card.

**Deputizing Your Employees, Family and Friends**

You should supply your employees, family members, and friends with your brochures and business cards to hand out. If your employees have their own name on your company’s business cards, perhaps it should include only the company’s contact information. You might even make them all a box with all your company’s marketing material.

**How to Turn Your Service Technician Into A Salesperson**

You actually can’t. You can turn a salesperson into a technician with training, but it is almost impossible to do the reverse. So instead, provide your service technicians and even delivery staff into walking marketers. Do this by providing them with brochures that list all the additional services your company offers. Instruct them to hand them out to every client they come in contact with. All your technicians need to learn is to say something like “Here is a list of other services we offer.”

**Ask Your Former Clients for Leads**

This is a sample letter that you can mail to your database of former clients.  It is designed to get you more work in several ways.  If you have not created a database of all your past clients, you should, and you should work it regularly.  By now, your client has probably forgotten your name and has misplaced your contact information.  Building a word-of-mouth business requires a little bit of work.

*[Your Letterhead]*

*[Date]*

*Dear [Former Client]*

*I hope you and your family are well. It’s been a while since we last talked and I wanted to touch base with you to let you know about some services I’m offering that you (or someone you know) could probably use. [Your Latest News, New Services &/or Return Services]*

*If you have any questions about the services I’ve already rendered for you, or if you have any questions about any of my other services that you may be interested in, please give me a call anytime at [Your Phone Number]*

*Thank you in advance for the opportunity to serve someone you know.*

*Sincerely,*

*[Your Name]*

*[Your Company Name]*

*[Your Phone Number]*

*[Your Email Address]*

*[Your Web Address]*

Don't forget to include several of your brochures and business cards!

**Ask Your Subcontractors for Leads**

This is best done by phone. Referrals from associated contractors are also a good source of leads.

**Start a Referral Program**

If you don’t have a referral program for the jobs you win you are missing out on potential work. Create an incentive for employees, family members, friends, former clients, suppliers, subcontractors, and even your barber to recommend you. Try offering something like a $50 gift card to any homeowner who refers you to a friend and you complete the job. Email the details to everyone in your database.

**Jobsite Yard Signs**

Signs should display your company logo, telephone number, website and logo. Also, if your company name doesn’t explain what kind of work you do, add a tagline that lists the services you offer. Example:

*ABC Contracting at Work*

*Roofing, siding, windows*

*(123) 456-7890*

*www.ABCcontracting.com*

Also add a literature or tube box to the sign (the type real estate agents use) to offer your brochures.

PIC

If your jurisdiction prohibits signs, make them warning signs with your contact info on them (the city probably won’t complain about a warning sign) or wrap a box trailer and bring it to the job site.

**Jobsite Door Hangers**

Doorknob hangers are marketing pieces that are hung on the doorknobs of homes in the immediate vicinity of your jobsite. They should include an explanation that you are working in the neighborhood, your logo, a list of services you offer, and a call-to-action such as *“Call me on my cell phone while I’m in the neighborhood and I’ll give you a free consultation.”*

Whoever hangs the doorknob hangers should be well groomed and wearing a collared shirt with the company logo and perhaps even a photo I.D. badge hanging from a lanyard around their neck.

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**Jobsite Mailings**

A jobsite mailing is a letter or series of letters to prospects living within a certain radius of a jobsite. You should also consider including your company brochure and business card. Here is a sample jobsite mailing letter:

*Dear [Prospect’s Name]*

*I’m writing to let you know that we are doing some work in your neighborhood on [Client’s Street]. We will make every effort to keep the jobsite clean and the noise to a minimum.*

*We offer extensive experience in [Your Services]*

*I’d like to talk to you about our services while I have a crew in your neighborhood. Call me on my cell phone at [Your Phone Number] for a free consultation. I look forward to hearing from you soon and we invite you to watch our progress.*

*Sincerely,*

*[Your Name]*

*[Your Company Name]*

*[Your Phone Number]*

*[Your Email Address]*

*[Your Web Address]*

*P.S. Feel free to call me in the evening at home, up until 9:30 P.M.*

**Always Include a P.S.**

People read their mail over a wastebasket. To speed up the process of determining what mail is important and what should get tossed, many people skip to the end of the letter to get to the punch line. This provides contractors with an opportunity to provide an extra incentive to respond and a call-to-action. At a minimum, your P.S. should quickly restate your reason for writing.

**Every-Door-Direct-Mail Service**

With Every Door Direct Mail (EDDM) service from the U.S. Postal Service, you can reach homeowners in the area you want to work. You don’t even need to know names or street addresses. You simply identify the neighborhoods you want to target, and your printed piece is delivered with the day’s mail to every address.

With Every Door Direct Mail service from the U.S. Postal Service, reaching the market that matters most to your business has never been easier. Their online mapping tool helps you target mailing routes by neighborhood, ZIP Code or city around your business. Identify the number of active households and businesses in your selected area and estimate postage all in one place. The tool even generates and prints the appropriate documentation to take with your mailing to the Post Office.  
  
**Post Completion Letter with Neighborhood Testimonial**

Upon completing a project, it is a good idea to mail a letter to all the neighbors asking them for work. Include a copy of the testimonial of the client who’s project you just completed. Here is a sample letter:

*Dear [Prospect’s Name)*

*I’m writing to let you know that we completed a project in your neighborhood for [Client’s Name] on [Client’s Street]. [Client’s Name] has given us permission to send you the enclosed testimonial.*

*We offer extensive experience in [Your Services].*

*I’d like to talk to you about our services. Call me on my cell phone at [Your Phone Number] for a free consultation. I look forward to hearing from you soon.*

*Sincerely,*

*[Your Name]*

*[Your Company Name]*

*[Your Phone Number]*

*[Your Email Address]*

*[Your Web Address]*

*Encl.*

**Newsletters and eNewsletters**

Newsletters are great way improve client retention by reminding former customers that you are still in business and desiring additional projects.

**Mining Building Permits**

Head down to your local building department and mine their database of new building permits (public information). Sending these folks a letter telling them you are available to help them with their project and letting them know what services you offer could be very fruitful.

**Mining Real Estate Transactions**

Your local newspaper likely publishes a list of recent real estate transfers. New owners are often looking to renovate, sellers are often new owners too. Sending these folks a letter telling them you are available to help them with any projects being contemplated is a good idea.

**Mining Public Tax Records**

Your local tax assessor’s office has a list of real estate, the assessed value of that real estate, and the address the property tax bill is being mailed to. These records can help you target the affluent or other ideal prospect.

**Be Careful**

Don’t accidentally send a discount offer to a client you recently charged full price.

**Press Releases**

Contractors should use the format of the standard press release to make announcements on their websites and contractor blogs.  This lends an official quality to any announcements that deserve particular attention or that are time-sensitive.  This will help the website visitor distinguish between sales-type information and general news announcements about the contractor's business.

Press releases can also be emailed to business contacts to help spread the word, as well as increase essential SEO hits--a huge advantage of having your press releases searchable online.  Since they are considered soft marketing, press releases are more likely to be widely distributed by the recipients while having the same impact as paid advertising.

Some good uses of press releases include announcing the following:

* introducing new staff;
* the formation of new partnerships with consulting experts or other industry-related personnel;
* the formation of a new association chapter, with the sender of the press release as its head or spokesperson;
* the contractor's having earned new training accreditations and/or licenses;
* offering new types of services;
* the business' relocation;
* the business' expansion;
* a change in the business' name or contact information; and
* the contractor joining industry-related associations.

Here's a sample press release:

*CONTACT:  John Smith, President*

*(123) 456-7890*

*john.smith@abc-contracting.com*

*www.abc-contracting.com*

*FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*

*BOULDER, Colo. (June 22, 2012)--ABC Contracting is pleased to announce that it is now offering Home Energy Inspections.  With support from InterNACHI, the International Association of Certified Home Inspectors, and the U.S. Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Agency, these inspections will enable homeowners to receive a specific home energy score that will become the basis for their home improvements and upgrades that will save them money on their home energy costs.*

*Homeowners wishing to have their homes assessed may contact ABC Contracting to schedule their Home Energy Inspection at 720-555-1212 or by visiting their website at www.abc-contracting.com.  A Home Energy Audit can be conducted in the course of a general home inspection for home sellers and homebuyers, and is also offered as part of an annual home maintenance inspection.*

*###*

*ABC Contracting has been providing contracting services in the Boulder County area for the past 20 years.  Their staff is fully trained and accredited, and all of their employees abide by a strict Code of Ethics.*

Note the various elements and conventions in the sample press release, from top to bottom, which should be included in all press releases:

1. Your name, title, and contact information (but not mailing address), as well as website address, should be included following the capped and (optionally) bolded word "CONTACT:".  This will enable the staff who receives your press release an easy way to instantly contact you without having to hunt for your information.  The press release doesn't have to be issued by the company president, however.  But the person who can field questions about it, should any arise, should be the one noted as the contact person.  (The company's full name and snail-mail address are already included in your letterhead, so it's unnecessary to include them in the contact information.)
2. The header of a press release is "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE," which should be centered and bolded, and optionally italicized.  Some organizations send out their press releases before they want them actually released; this gives the recipient extra time to organize multiple press releases from different entities, etc.  In this case, the press release should read "EMBARGOED UNTIL JULY 1, 2012."  The option of embargoing a press release also allows the writer to make any changes and send a revised press release before the release date.  An embargoed press release should be sent out only as needed.  Typically, most press releases are for immediate publication.
3. The city is spelled out using all capital letters.
4. The state or province is abbreviated in the style originated by the Associated Press, which is the style guide used by newspapers.  Because press releases, as a form, fall somewhere between advertisements and actual news, the AP Style is the adopted convention for press releases.
5. The date is enclosed in parentheses.  Except for month names that are short (including April, May, June and July), they are also abbreviated using AP Style, such as "Jan.," "Aug.," Sept.," and so forth.
6. Following the date in parentheses is the em-dash or double-dash, without any spaces between the date and the body of the press release.
7. The body of the text follows; it can be more than one paragraph, with the main announcement in the first sentence, followed by additional supporting information.  The press release in its entirety should not exceed one page.
8. The end of the press release is indicated by a triple hash mark that is centered on the page.  This is another AP Style convention that indicates to both newspaper editors and radio announcers when the end of the press release actually is.
9. The italicized information below the hash marks identifies the person/organization supplying the press release.  This information is straightforward and factual but may have a marketing tone to it.

When emailing your press release to other parties, such as past clients, real estate professionals, and industry associations and organizations, be sure to put your press release on your letterhead and convert it into a PDF, and email that as an attachment, indicating in your email's subject line that it is a press release, so that its timeliness will be readily understood.  This will give your recipients the option of posting the entire document on their own website (which will display your business letterhead), or they can simply copy and paste the text.  Your press release should be no longer than one page and should contain no photos, graphics or pictures, except those that may already appear in your company letterhead.

Press releases should be used sparingly so that your company's legitimate news doesn't get ignored because you've attempted to disguise routine marketing as something newsworthy.  Marketing doesn't rate the same level of attention, especially when you are sending out your press release to third parties.

Some reasons that press releases should not be used include announcing the following:

* special sales or discounts;
* non-business related news, including news of a personal nature;
* endorsements of other businesses, entities or products; or
* news or information (such as a press release, white paper or news article) that is plagiarized from another source and repackaged as your own.  Your press release should be specifically relevant to your business, rather than to the inspection industry at large.

Press releases are a great way to announce news affecting your business and to lend legitimacy to its importance.  Used with discretion, they are a meaningful way to cultivate your connections with people and organizations who can help indirectly market your business and services.

**Tracking Results**

You must track where your leads are coming from, how much those leads cost, how many of those leads convert to projects, and the profit margin on those projects. The success of any lead generation program is determined by its cost per dollar of profit generated as represented by a percentage.

For example: Let’s say you put together a multi-piece mailing that includes a cover letter, a testimonial from a local client, a brochure, and a business card. Now let’s assume you mail it to 1,000 people who live near a project you recently completed for a client. If the piece costs $2.00 with postage, your costs would be $2,000. Now, lets say you get 50 leads from that mailing ($40/lead), 20 scheduled appointments ($100/appointment) for a consultation and 10 hire you… it cost you $200 to generate each project. And to keep the math simple, let’s say the profit from those 10 projects (including the two you broke even on and the one that lost money) is a total of $20,000. Then your cost per dollar of profit generated is $2,000/$20,000=10% or 10 cents to generate every $1 of profit. Not bad.

**Every Link in Your Lead-to-Profit Conversion Chain Must Be Strong**

If you increase the number of leads the mailing generates, increase the number of appointments booked, increase the number of projects awarded, or increase the amount of profit on each project…. You earn much more profit. Always be trying to strengthen lead conversion.

**Converting Calls to Appointments**

How well is your phone answered? It needs to be answered quickly and correctly…. Every time. You should have access to you calendar every time so that you can book an appointment. Your prospect will judge your company based on their interactions with you on the phone.

Ending a phone call effectively includes summarizing the call.  Say, “Mrs. Smith, I have you scheduled your appointment for Tuesday, May 5th.  Is that right?”  Wait for your client’s acknowledgement.  This recap will help reduce errors in scheduling.

Before ending the phone conversation, ask your client if there is anything else that your company can do.  Give your name again.  “My name is Mary.  If there’s anything else we can do for you, or if your schedule changes, feel free to call me.  Until then, Joe will see you on Tuesday. “

**Listen to Yourself**

Uses a digital recorder to listen to both the way you answer the phone and the way you interact with potential customers at a sales visit (it is technically illegal to record in some states). Listen for:

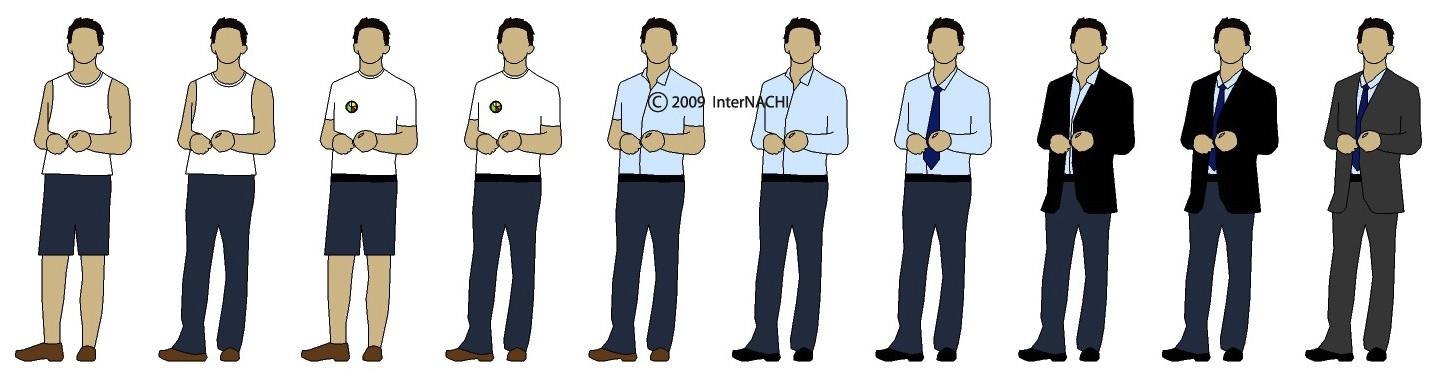
* your general tone
* your clearness of speech
* your willingness to listen and respond appropriately
* your close. Did you actually ask them for the job?

**The Appointment**

Before you go on an appointment to provide an estimate, perform some internet research online about the potential customer first. This might help you get a feel for the prospect.

**Converting Appointments to Sales**

Should a contractor be judged by what he/she wears to give an estimate? Perhaps not, but the reality is that proper attire is an important part of a contractor’s success.  A contractor's core product is him/herself, and the product should be packaged professionally. Below are some tips for contractors:



**Clothing:**

* Never arrive to an appointment in dirty clothes. It is fine for clothes to get dirty during the project because the customer expects this to happen.
* If the estimate will require you to get dirty, consider bringing coveralls or a Tyvek® suit.
* If you have more than one estimate appointment scheduled for the day, consider bringing a change of clothes, or at least a fresh shirt.
* Consider dressing up a bit (by perhaps wearing a tie) when working in more expensive neighborhoods, and dressing casually in more modest neighborhoods.
* Dress for the type of property. An estimate appointment at horse farm may require boots. A dentist's office may require shoe covers.
* Dress for the climate. Shorts are fine in southern and beach areas but are often not adequate in cooler, northern climates.
* Cut-off jeans and gym shorts are not appropriate.  Nicer shorts with pockets to hold equipment are acceptable.
* Khakis or jeans can both be appropriate, depending on the client base.
* Tank tops are never appropriate on an estimate appointment.
* T-shirts are generally not recommended unless they sport your company logo or your company's name.
* Polo and collared shirts are fine, as are sports jackets.
* Sports teams, political or pop-culture printed t-shirts are never appropriate. Such messages and images can passively offend clients.
* A suit is not appropriate, as it implies that you are not a real contractor, but rather a salesman only.
* Shoes should be lace-up and rugged.
* In warmer climates or on summer days, you can wear clean tennis shoes or boat shoes.
* Outside of beach towns, open-toed sandals are not appropriate, even in summer.
* Female contractors should not, of course, wear short dresses or high heels.
* Bring an extra pair of shoes. Boots or work shoes can be swapped for a nice pair of slippers, shoe covers, or sneakers before entering living areas. Never track mud, roofing tar or pet droppings into a home. Also, some customs require the removal of shoes and hats upon entry.

**Personal Hygiene**

Before an appointment to provide an estimate, make sure you have:

* showered;
* brushed your teeth, flossed, and used mouthwash;
* trimmed your nails;
* shaved or trimmed your beard, if you have one;
* combed your hair; and
* applied deodorant.  Also, go easy on the cologne/perfume.

Between appointments, freshen up with a travel bag that contains:

* a hand mirror (or a camping mirror);
* a comb or brush;
* chewing gum (preferably a minty or otherwise sanitizing flavor);
* mouthwash;
* deodorant;
* a spare bag for dirtied clothing; and
* wet-naps or waterless hand cleanser to clean and sanitize your hands before meeting with the client.

**What to Bring**

Bring the following to the estimate appointment:

* Your business card.
* Your brochure.
* Material/product samples.
* Testimonials (local if you have them)
* Copies of your licenses.
* Leave-behind packet.

**Dress Rehearsal**

Have a co-worker or friend pretend to be a new prospect. Instruct him/her to be as hard on you as possible as you attempt to close a sale.

**Meeting a Prospect for the First Time**

Research says that people tend to respond less to what you say and more to your body language.  Your tone of voice is the second most important factor in face-to-face communication.  What you actually say is third.  Therefore, be aware of what you are physically doing and how your clients may perceive your body language and actions.

Here are a few recommendations about what you should do on the day of an inspection.

* Make sure that your company name is identified on your vehicle.
* Wash your vehicle in the morning before arriving at your first appointment of the day.
* Schedule enough time for lunch.  Avoid eating in your vehicle, but if you do, check your clothes for drips of food and stains before arriving for the appointment.
* Do not pull into the driveway with your radio or CD player blaring, whether it's music, commercials or talk radio.  Anything loud is annoying and disrupts the environment, and shows a lack of respect for the neighbors.
* If you're on your cell phone when you pull up, quickly conclude your call before exiting your vehicle.  You want your client to feel that s/he is your only priority.
* Don't embarrass yourself by allowing empty cans or other trash to fall out of your truck when you open the door.
* Don't slam the door of your vehicle.
* Don't arrive smoking or chewing tobacco.
* Don't spit.
* Don't arrive carrying a cup of coffee or other beverage.  Keep at least one hand free so you can greet your client with a handshake.
* At all times, particularly when meeting a client for the first time, you ought to have a calm rather than rushed demeanor, even if you're running late.
* Have your business card ready as you approach the property.
* Wear a nice watch.  It shows that you respect your client’s time.

**The Handshake**

People tend to unconsciously judge another person by their handshake.  There are ways to shake hands properly that leave a positive impression.  Grasp the other person’s hand so that your palms touch.  Provide a firm grasp.  Give an intentional shake -- two or three actions, at most. Do not grasp tightly or test the other person’s strength.  While shaking, make eye contact to show that you’re interested in the other person, and also to pick up on the other person’s non-verbal clues.  Then release.  That’s it.

If you avoid shaking hands (with either gender), the person may consider it a sign of disrespect. Also, a limp handshake expresses discomfort, or a lack of strength or self-confidence.  These are non-verbal impressions that you may accidentally convey based on your handshake, whether or not such attributes are true.  You can greatly control the impression you give using non-verbal cues and body language, starting first with your smile, and then with your handshake.

**Body Language**

When you’re in the presence of another person, you are communicating. What is mostly being communicated is what you're *not* saying.  One UCLA study suggests that 93% of our most effective communication comes through non-verbal communication.

We speak with our body -- our actions and our face. We speak with smiles, frowns, and raised eyebrows.  We even communicate with the distance we put between ourselves and another person.

Some tips for conveying a positive attitude include the following:

* Maintain good posture -- don't slouch.
* Keep your head up and maintain eye contact with the other person.
* Keep your hands in a natural position by placing them on your hips, holding something, such as clipboard or a pen, or gently clasping your hands together in front of you or behind your back.
* When in conversation face to face, nod your head occasionally to indicate to the other person that you're listening.
* Look your prospect in the eyes.

Maintaining the appropriate personal space is important, too.  The convention is to keep about a 3-foot space between yourself and the person you're talking to.

Always be aware of your body language.

For example, facing someone with your arms crossed sometimes conveys that you don't believe what the other person is saying, or that you're angry.  This defensive posture can create an imaginary wall between yourself and your client.  It’s important that you understand that you can say the right words but convey the wrong meaning.

**Your First Words**

“Hello, I'm Jim.  It's great to meet you.”

Now, start establishing rapport with your prospect by exchanging pleasantries, asking general questions, and talking about something you have in common.  Try any of the following:

* “How are you today?”
* “This is a really nice neighborhood!”
* “I'm looking forward to helping you out today!”

**Listen**

A conversation is a like a tennis match, with each person having a turn.  Let the other person speak.  Respect your prospect’s point of view.  When you're actively listening, focus on the other person.  Pay attention.  Don't allow your mind or your eyes to wander.  If you're face to face, don’t look over the speaker's shoulder to see who else is coming into the room.  Try to stay interested.  Smile.  Make eye contact.  Nod occasionally.  Say things such as, “Yes, I see,” or “Hmmm.”  These are called "prompts" because they indicate to the speaker that you're listening and prompt him or her to continue talking.

It's good practice to wait a second -- literally -- after someone has finished speaking before you begin talking.  Take a moment.  Allow a moment of pause or silence to exist after someone finishes his or her sentence.  It will help prevent you from talking while the other person still is.

One way to demonstrate that you're listening is to repeat back what your client says.  For example, you may respond, “From what I understand, you're concerned with …  Is that correct?”  Summarizing your understanding of what your client said, shows that you've been listening and are interested in helping.

Also, don't interrupt.  Avoid entering the conversation while someone is speaking even if s/he has left a short pause in the conversation.  Allow your prospect to pause and think about what he or she is saying.  A pause in the conversation does not necessarily mean you need to jump in and say something.  Refrain from injecting something simply because there is an opportunity to do so.

**Leave Behind Custom-Labeled Material/Product Samples**

If you bring material or product samples to a prospect, make sure you have a custom label on it. The label should explain the quality of the material, the benefits of the product, and of course your company’s contact information.

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**Pass**

There are some consumers you don’t want for clients. You don't have to accept work from everyone who wants to hire you.  If a client starts off being difficult or unreasonable, it usually gets worse, not better.  While it may be hard to not bid a job, it's sometimes cheaper in the long run.

Furthermore, an added bonus to refusing to allow these consumers to become clients is that they become your competitors' clients.  Pity those competitors.

This is another reason it’s good to stay in contact with other contractors. These other contractors may be people you came up in the trades with, friends, or they may be subs you use occasionally but it’s good to pass on the word about bad clients to everyone you know. They’ll appreciate it and often do the same for you.

The same is true if you’re a sub. There are bad contractors, builders and developers to work for. Avoid marketing to these people. Even if they have bad reputations, they sometimes still have influence and it’s better to not have to deal with them than to have to turn them down.

*"Undertake not what you cannot perform, but be careful to keep your promise.”*

George Washington

**Proposal Writing Tips**

* Be as detailed as possible about what is and what isn’t included in your proposals.
* Tell your clients their pets and children have to be kept out of the way.
* Make it easy for the consumer to verify your license.
* Have your proposals proofed for spelling and grammar mistakes.
* Remember: distance to the job is an important factor in estimating.

**Digits and Hyphens in Proposals**

When writing proposals, it’s sometimes difficult for contractors to decide whether to write numbers using numerals or as spelled-out words.  The rule of thumb for grammarians is that numbers used as measurements and percentages should be rendered as digits, and numbers describing amounts and as length of time should be rendered as words, particularly when referring to single-digit numbers (amounts under 10), or where the use of double-digit numbers may cause visual confusion for the reader. For example:

* Maintenance should be performed no less than every two years for one- and two-family dwellings.
* Expect to use eight 5-pound buckets of compound.
* There should be a 6-foot turnaround at each entrance, which should be at least 3 feet wide.
* The slope of the grade should be at least 5 percent (or 5%).

But this is okay:

* The structure houses 24 businesses.   *(Note the double-digit amount over 10 rendered as digits, especially because there are no other numbers to compete with it.)*
* You will need twelve 10-inch shims. *(Best to spell out 12 to avoid confusion with "10-inch" right next to it.)*

In addition to conforming to the basic rules of English, the numerals-versus-words distinction helps to maintain visual uniformity, and it makes information recognition easier for proposal readers.

Also, note the use of hyphens with numbers.  In adjective phrases that modify or describe the nouns they precede, the phrases should be hyphenated, like this:

* two-family dwelling -- “two-family” describes the type of dwelling.
* 5-pound bucket --  “5-pound” describes the capacity of the bucket.
* 6-foot turnaround --  “6-foot” describes the space for the turnaround.

Otherwise, no hyphenation for the numbers is needed, like this:

* Two families live in the dwelling.
* 5 pounds of nails
* The cast-iron tub rests on 6 feet.

**“Farther” vs. “Further” in Proposals**

Merriam-Webster Dictionary states that *farther* and *further* are interchangeable. However, recently, grammarians are distinguishing their use. Here is the difference:

*Farther* should be used to show a relation to physical distance:

*“The downspout should discharge farther from the house.”*

A little trick is to see if an actual distance can be used in place of the word *farther* in your sentence:

*“The downspout should discharge 6 feet* *from the house.”*

If it can, you were correct in using *farther.* *Further* should be used when referring to degree, time, space, or extent or depth, as in:

*“This problem should be investigated further by a roofing contractor.”*

**Charging for Estimates**

If you’re getting too many requests for estimates that aren’t converting to sales, it might be that your estimates (in and of themselves) have value to the prospects or that your prospects aren’t really serious about having the work performed. These issues can be resolved by charging for estimates.

Clients (other people’s) often take advantage of offers to do free estimates to check on the prices of the contractor they intend to use.

Especially when times are tough, estimating even for the people who will probably hire you can eat up lots of time.

Some contractors are hesitant about charging for estimates and some consumers are equally hesitant about paying for them. I suggest this short but true story be added to your webpage or any communication that discusses your fee schedule for estimates:

***That's a lot of money for only a few hours’ work!***

*Pablo Picasso, the painter, was dining at a restaurant in New York City.  A fan introduced herself to him and gushed at how thrilled she was to meet the great artist, and how she loved his work.  Encouraged by his polite acceptance, the fan begged, "Oh, Mr. Picasso, would you draw me a sketch?"  Picasso grabbed some paper and, with a pen, promptly sketched the waiters passing parfaits.  As the woman reached for the sketch, Picasso said, "Madame, that will be $10,000." Shocked, she replied, "But that only took you five minutes!" "No, Madame," replied Picasso. "It took me 50 years."*

Picasso priced his service to its value, not to the cost of manufacture.  Picasso did not price his service based on the cost of the paper plus the cost of ink plus some hourly wage... and nor should contractor.  .

Charging for estimates is a way of screening prospects for seriousness. You might also offer to credit the charge back to prospects who become clients.

The success of charging for estimates will vary with the area, the client, type of job, local job market, and economic climate.

**When You Don’t Get the Job**

Find out why. This is a link in your chain that has to be strengthened. The following is a sample letter to use when you don’t get hired. Include a full-sized, pre-addressed, postage-paid envelope.

*Dear [Prospect]*

*Thank you for the opportunity to consult with you about your [Service Offered] project. Would you please take a moment and tell us why you did not choose our company? Was our proposal lacking in some way? Was price the issue? Perhaps you decided not to proceed with the project.*

*I’ve enclosed a postage-paid envelope. It would greatly help our efforts to improve.*

*Also, in your note, please let me know if I may call you in the future.*

*Thanks so much.*

*Sincerely,*

*[Your Name]*

*[Your Company Name]*

*[Your Phone Number]*

*[Your Email Address]*

*[Your Web Address]*

**When You Do Get the Job**

Work as if you are on camera.

* No swearing.
* No offensive T-shirts. Better to have uniforms with logos that promote your brand identity.
* Keep job site clean.
* Keep tools organized.
* No smoking.
* Don’t bring your dog to the job site.
* No loud music on the job site. No political shows. There also may be city noise ordinances.

**Bring the Right Equipment to the Jobsite**

Having the right equipment on a jobsite says much about a contractor

While small business owners, including contractors, may want to avoid incurring additional debt whenever possible, financing expensive purchases will help them maintain a positive cash flow.  This is essential for any company’s survival, especially in the current economic climate that’s seeing so many small businesses close their doors.

Perhaps you need to outfit a new office with a copier, computer system or furniture.  You might need field gear, such as scaffolding or trade-specific tools.  Contractors who are in the market for heavy equipment or other high-ticket capital purchases for their expanding their business would do well to finance such acquisitions using a commercial equipment loan.  In some cases, the contractor may opt for a lease instead.  Before paging through any online catalogs and loading up the virtual shopping cart, the contractor should do some homework first to find the best financing deal to maintain financial flexibility and a healthy bank account.

**Buy or Lease?**

Depending on the equipment, financing a lease instead of a purchase may make more sense.  Items based on technology, such as computers and copiers, for example, tend to undergo manufacturers’ updates and revamps more frequently than, say, furniture and other items that are built to last.  When a piece of equipment will stand the test of time, it’s a reasonable move to finance its purchase.  If the item is subject to planned obsolescence, it’s savvier to lease.  For commercial equipment, there are several considerations that the inspector should explore.

**Financing a Commercial Loan**

With the proposed changes for the Small Business Administration, which will give both small and large banks greater incentive for lending to small businesses, more opportunities are opening up for contractors wanting to expand their businesses and finance major purchases.  Once you’ve decided to finance a purchase, and depending on the item and the amount you want to borrow, as well as the lender, you may be required to provide financial records to prove your creditworthiness and to secure the lowest rate.  You may want to seek the assistance of a broker who can research your loan options and match you with the best lender.  Brokers’ fees can add 3% to 5% to the cost of your purchase.

**Financing a Commercial Lease**

There are a few different options available when it comes to leasing, and most lenders offer them.

* A **deferred lease** allows you to skip the first two or three months of payments, as well as any down payment.  This is useful for people with strong credit and the need to acquire expensive commercial equipment right away, but without the cash flow for immediate loan servicing.  Once the repayment kicks in, the amount tends to be higher than with other types of leases.
* A **step-up lease** is similar to a deferred lease, but no initial payments are skipped; they are simply lower, and the amount increases as the term progresses.  Start-ups, and small business owners whose cash flow situation is sluggish but not dire, opt for this type of lease, with the advantage that subsequent payments are increased, compared to the first several payments, but they’re still manageable.
* A **skip lease** allows the borrower to skip different months of repayment during the term while interest still accrues.  This is a typical choice for contractors who experience seasonal slow periods, and prevents them from defaulting on their lease agreements or having the financed equipment repossessed.

There is no right or best option across the board for the contractor or any small business when it comes to commercial loans.  Your smartest choice will depend on your company’s unique circumstances, as well as the equipment you have your eye on.  But some generalities regarding commercial equipment financing can be summed up in the following lists.

**The Upside of Purchasing:**

* You own the equipment.
* You may be able to write-off the purchase during the first year.
* Commercial loan rates are generally manageable, especially if your credit history is solid and you use an SBA-backed lender.  Generally speaking, the more high-ticket the item is, the lower the interest rate will be, and the loan term will tend to be longer, as well.
* The item is considered a capital asset, which speaks to your company’s overall financial fitness.

**The Downside of Purchasing:**

* Because the item starts depreciating in value after the first year (check IRS rules and regulations), the buyer may not be able to secure 100% financing using a commercial loan, and may be required to finance part of the purchase out-of-pocket as a down payment.
* A commercial loan generally means that the item purchased is named as collateral, so it can be repossessed if the borrower defaults on the loan.

**The Upside of Leasing**

* Up-front cash for application and other fees is minimal, usually between 10% and 20%.
* Business owners with weak credit histories can obtain leases more easily than financing for purchases with commercial loans.
* You can contract short-term for more high-end equipment whose cost would ultimately be prohibitive as a financed purchase.
* Maintenance on the item is taken care of by the vendor.
* Depending on the item leased, it can generally be upgraded at the end of the term with a lease renewal.  This is especially important for computer systems, and even service vehicles.
* Under a “true lease,” the item may be purchased outright at fair market value or at a discounted rate at the end of the contract while expensing the payments during the term of the lease.

**The Downside of Leasing**

* In the long run, leases are more expensive than other types of financing options because of the higher interest rate charged over a comparatively shorter loan term.
* Additional charges for delivery, set-up, training and service calls may be built into the financing agreement.
* If you purchase the item at the end of the lease term using a conditional sale or “rent-to-own” lease, also known as a finance lease, you can’t take advantage of tax breaks since you will own the item by the end of the lease term.
* Breaking a lease before the end of the contracted term can cost the borrower significant penalties.
* Without the proper lease agreement, default means repossession, and a ding on your credit.

The first purchase contractors may wish to make is a computer that can be used calculate a cost-benefit analysis to see how financing a lease or purchase of major equipment will affect the company’s cash flow.  Lenders can also crunch these numbers for contractors, too.  Whether going with a trusted and experienced broker or going it alone, using one of the many online resources available, contractors and other small business owners owe it to their bottom line and long-term stability to perform their own due diligence when making the important decision to secure financing for commercial equipment for their companies.

And remember, proper equipment on the job site will add to the professionalism of your contracting business.

**Keeping the Client in the Loop**

Emailing updates to your clients keeps them at ease, especially if the project is running behind. Never let your client think you’ve forgotten about them.

**Phrases for Use in a Project Status Report**

* I am pleased to report that…
* I am optimistic about…
* Indications are that...
* After… we found that…
* To meet our goal…

**Change Orders**

Always make your clients sign change orders. Never accept verbal Oks. When the end of the job approaches and they get desperate, they’ll deny you and you’ll never get it all back in mediation. Contractors virtually never get all their money in mediation without a pristine paper trail and a clear, clear record of all agreements. Even then it’s often difficult.

**Email Communication**

* Make sure your subject line represents the message of the email.
* Always begin an email with the person’s name, if you know it, such as “Dear Mrs. Smith.”
* Keep your email messages short and to the point.  Your client will likely not read long blocks of print.
* Keep e-lingo, such as "LOL," "IMHO," and smiley faces or emoticons reserved for your friends, not your clients.
* Don't use all capital letters in email (unless you want to shout or be rude).
* Be extra-polite but not patronizing.
* Be sure to proofread your email before clicking the "send" button.  Read the message out loud to hear how it sounds.

Reminders:

* Emotions, sarcasim, and humor do not transmit very well over email.
* Like a letter, when you email someone, you’re created a written record.

**Client Satisfaction Surveys**

Client Satisfaction Surveys have been shown to have clear business development advantages for the contractors that conduct them. Satisfaction surveys appeal to a client’s desire to be coddled, and reinforce feelings that they may already have about the business conducting the survey, and make them more likely to purchase its products or services in the future.

Surveys can also increase people’s awareness of a business’s products and services and thereby encourage additional purchases.

There is also an effect that is quite below-the-radar. The very act of asking clients about their opinions can induce them to form judgments that otherwise might not occur to them, that, for example, they really do like your contracting services, and would not hesitate to recommend them to others.

In addition, the Client Satisfaction Survey also provides a factual record of the client’s version of events surrounding the inspection in the relevant time frame, thus inhibiting the client’s ability to change his story to fit the circumstances of a later claim.

Using a Client Satisfaction Survey hits several birds with one stone.

1. **It limits your liability.**  Often, a dissatisfied client will describe your services to his/her neighbors -- or, worse, to a judge -- much differently than the truth.  Procuring and maintaining a copy of this survey will bring them back to earth, so to speak.  It is a nice document to have to present to a complaining agent and can often end a legal action all by itself.  It is the next best thing to a deposition.
2. **It alerts you to weaknesses in your service.**  Often, a client is too shy to complain to you in person about your service -- or, worse, complains only to the person who referred you.  Providing this survey offers your client a way to express his/her dissatisfaction while you are still onsite and can do something about it.  Client feedback is necessary to improving your service.
3. **It alerts your client about other services you offer.**  Some contractors offer additional services for additional fees, of course.  This Survey lets them know about the other services you are willing to perform.
4. **It lets your client know that you care about his/her opinion.**  Everyone likes being asked.
5. **It helps you get more work.** By sending a copy of the flattering Survey back to the person who referred you, you remind that person to refer you again.

Near the completion of every project, ask your client to fill out the survey and sign it.  Save the original forever!

Tip: Some contractors ask that the survey be completed several times during the course of the project.

Here are some suggestions to help you create your own Client Satisfaction Survey. You can get as fancy as you want, but I recommend keeping it simple

* Client’s Name:
* Client’s phone number:
* Property address:
* Was the project completed on time?
* Were the contractors clean and courteous?
* Are you satisfied with the quality of the materials used?
* Are you satisfied with the quality of the workmanship?
* Did the contractor explain about other services our company offers?
* Was the value of this project worth the fee you paid?
* Would you hire our company again?
* Would you recommend us to a friend?
* If you would like us to email you free seasonal maintenance reminders about home care tips, provide your email address:
* Client Signature:
* Date:
* Please write your suggestions for improving our contracting services on back.

**Stickers on Hot Water Tanks or Electrical Service Panels**

After a project is completed, you should place a bright-colored sticker on the client’s hot water tank or electric panel (or both) that provides your contact information.

\*\*\*\*\*\*

**Complaint Handling**

Eventually, every contractor will receive a complaint from a client, but it's not necessarily bad news.  A complaint provides the opportunity to learn what your client really thinks about your service, which gives you the chance to consider making changes to how you do things in your company.  Complaints are actually more valuable than compliments in some ways.   Welcome them.  Clients who go through the trouble of complaining are usually interested in giving you the chance to make things right.

The Number One rule for receiving a complaint from a former client is to listen.  Remain calm and composed.  A person calling with a complaint may be insulting and rude, but you must be professional throughout.

Assure the client that you will do what you can to help him or her.  Have a pen and paper handy.  Write down any notes that are critical to the conversation, such as dates, what happened, who discovered the problem, whether it's been corrected, etc.

Listen to what the client says.  The first couple of sentences will tell you exactly what problem(s) the client is experiencing.  Pay close attention to what is being said without interrupting. If the caller is upset, rambling, and not able to verbalize well, then assist them by asking questions, such as, “What happened after that?” or “Could you tell me more about that?” or “What happened next?”  Finally, be sure to ask “How can I help you?” or “What is it that you would like us to do?”

Before proceeding to a resolution, make sure that you understand the situation.  Ask questions to see if there’s been a simple misunderstanding that can be easily resolved.  If the complaint is more than just a misunderstanding, ask questions to genuinely understand the complaint and the problem your client is experiencing.  Summarize what you understand the problem to be.  The caller will acknowledge or correct you.  Try, “So, what you’re saying is…” or “Do I understand you correctly or did I miss the point?”

Express empathy with the caller.  Let the caller know that you understand their situation and what they’re going through.  Tell them again that you will help them.

If there is a solution, make sure that the client has no doubt as to its specifics and how the issue will be resolved.  Ask the client to confirm that they agree with the proposed solution to their situation.  “How do you feel about the solution I’ve suggested?” or “How does that sound to you?” or “Are you in agreement with that so far?”

If the caller wants to speak to the owner of the company, try the following, “Mrs. Smith, please give me the opportunity to resolve this matter.  I am sure I’ll be able to help.  But if you are still not satisfied, I’ll get the owner on the phone with you.”

If the caller uses profanity, you might say, “There is no reason to use profanity. Please continue without using those words.”  As a last resort, you may want to suggest that the caller call you back after he or she has had a chance to calm down, but never hang up on a caller, and don't be patronizing -- always use empathy, and keep them on the phone with you to resolve the situation whenever possible.

It may include scheduling a face-to-face meeting with the client to defuse the situation and bring a quick resolution.  The goal is to work together, avoiding their filing of a lawsuit, and to come up with a resolution that is mutually agreeable.

Ask the client to propose a solution. Letting the client make the opening offer lets you know exactly where you stand. Perhaps the client’s solution is less costly than what you were going to propose.

Tip: If your client doesn’t have a solution, perhaps propose a discount on a future service. This way, you get an opportunity to continue to work for the client.

According to the White House Office of Consumer Affairs:

* For every complaint you hear, there are 26 additional clients with unresolved problems, and six of these are serious.  You will never hear from these 26 again, and they are the ones who could tell you how to make your business better.
* Half to 70% of the clients who complain will do business with your company again if you resolve their problem.  If they feel you acted quickly and to their satisfaction, up to 96% of them will do business with you again, and they will probably refer other people to you.
* A dissatisfied client will tell nine to 15 people about their experience.  And about 10% of your dissatisfied clients will tell more than 20 people about their problem.  You cannot possibly afford the advertising costs it would take to overcome this negative word-of-mouth publicity.
* It costs five to six times as much to get a new (first-time) client as it does to keep a current one.

Do you know why most clients stop using your services?  The White House Office of Consumer Affairs says that:

* 1% simply die;
* 3% move out of your service area;
* 14% are dissatisfied with your services;
* 9% leave because of your competition; and, most importantly...
* 68% stop using your services because of an attitude of indifference by your company’s staff.  For most people, it was YOUR attitude that mattered most.

Make sure that your company is doing the right thing when it comes to satisfying clients.

**Phrases for Use in an Apology Letter**

* We apologize for…
* I was troubled to discover…
* Please accept our apology for…
* Please forgive me for…
* We acknowledge that we…
* I terribly regret…
* Can you suggest how we may resolve this…
* To ensure that something like this never happens again…
* We are taking immediate steps to…
* Next time I will…
* To make up for our error…
* We will not charge you for…
* We will credit you for…
* What I can offer you is…
* We are immediately shipping you…

Reminder: Use the complaints as a learning tool for the entire company, including sub-contractors and office staff.

Tip: Create a complaint-taking template for your company.

**After a Complaint is Resolved**

There are two things you might want to procure from your client after a complaint is successfully resolved. The first is a general release. This is particularly important if you solved the issue by refunding money. The following is sample language for a general release:

*GENERAL RELEASE*

*TO ALL TO WHOM THESE PRESENTS SHALL COME OR MAY CONCERN, KNOW THAT (Your Client) as the RELEASOR, for good and valuable consideration received from (Your Company Name), as the RELEASEE, the receipt and adequacy of which is hereby acknowledged, each hereby releases and discharges the RELEASEE, each of the RELEASEE’S subsidiaries and their respective principals, affiliates, related entities, shareholders, officers, directors, agents, employees and their respective heirs, executors, administrators, successors and assigns from all actions, causes of action, suits, debts, dues, sums of money, accounts, reckonings, bonds, bills, specialties, covenants, controversies, agreements, promises, variances, trespasses, damages, judgments, extents, executions, claims, and demands whatsoever, in law, admiralty or equity, which against the RELEASEE, the RELEASOR and the RELEASOR’S heirs, executors, administrators, successors and assigns ever had, now have or hereafter can, shall or may, have for, upon or by reason of any matter, cause or thing whatsoever from the beginning of the world to the day of the date of this RELEASE solely in connection with the contracting services performed by (Your Company Name) arising out of that certain work performed around (Date or Month/Year Work was Performed)*

*Whenever the text hereof requires, the use of singular number shall include the appropriate plural number as the text of the within instrument may require.*

*This RELEASE may not be changed orally.*

*IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the RELEASOR has executed this RELEASE on the \_\_\_\_\_\_day of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_.*

*(For a Corporation)*

*\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ By: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*

*Attest: Name:*

*Title:*

*(For an individual)*

*\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_(SEAL)*

*WITNESS:*

*\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_(SEAL)*

*Both Releasor and Releasee will sign, in the form required (corporation or individual)*

The second item to procure after a complaint is resolved is a testimonial. This can be used in your marketing programs just like any other testimonial, even if it reveals there was a complaint. Example: “I had a complaint about the work that was done….. and ABC Contracting resolved it to my satisfaction immediately”

**Defending Your Reputation**

It’s rare, but sometimes, disgruntled clients resort to publicly attacking the contractor by posting defamatory statements about them on home improvement blogs.  The following is a sample letter you can use to try to stop such defamation.  As always, have your attorney review it.

*[Date]*

*RE: Defamation*

*Dear [Client]:*

*You made defamatory statements about me that damaged my reputation as a contractor.*

*Specifically, you made the following false statements:*

*[Describe each false statement, when it was made, what was said or written, and who heard or read the statement. Consider attaching proof of the statement and/or copies of the defamatory writings]*

*The law is clear that when a defendant makes defamatory statements about a private person in his trade, business or profession, it is defamation* per se*.  In such cases, the law presumes injury and the plaintiff need not prove actual damages.  The U.S. Supreme Court determined that this principle is fully consistent with the U.S. Constitution.  See,* New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*, 376 U.S. 254 (1964).*

*I demand that you immediately retract your defamatory statements.  I specifically ask that you take the following actions:*

*[State what corrective action you want the potential defendant to take.]*

*Your willingness to take these actions immediately will play an important role in whether I decide to move forward with a defamation lawsuit.*

*If you refuse to take these steps, a judge or jury may consider your refusal as evidence of malice and may award me exemplary damages.*

*If you believe your statements are not defamatory, I request that you provide me with all documents you rely on in support of your contention.  I also request the name, address, phone number, and email address of each person you believe can testify that the statements were not defamatory.  I need this information to determine whether to move forward with a lawsuit against you.*

*Sincerely,*

*[Your Name]*

*[Your Company Name]*

*[Your Phone Number]*

*[Your Email Address]*

**A Smart Post-Completion Gift**

I think a nice gift to provide your clients after the job is completed is a framed set of before/after pictures. It will remind them of you. Tape your business card to the back.

**Personal Touch**

Email is a very useful business tool, but a personal phone call or a handwritten note is always the best way to say “thank you.”

**Why Contractors Should Take Continuing Education** (even when it’s not required)

Some jurisdictions require contractors to meet minimum Continuing Education requirements each year.  However, even if your state or province does not, there are still good reasons for taking such courses regularly.

* First and most obviously is the fact that **taking courses can help you become a better contractor.**  Smart contractors who are serious about their business will stay on top of their game by continually learning.  Furthermore, innovations and the growing number of new products in the building industry mean that there's always something new for the contractor to know.
* **A contractor who keeps current with the industry will almost always have greater credibility with consumers.** Taking Continuing Education classes strengthens an contractor’s credentials, and the contractor’s credentials are important in marketing his/her services.  Many contractors now display their Certificates of Completion on their websites from all the courses they have completed.
* **Attending or taking online Continuing Education classes can strengthen a contractor’s credibility in court.** In states where Continuing Education classes are mandatory, a contractor’s failure to meet the state’s requirements could result not only in administrative action, but could also be considered evidence of negligence in a civil suit against the contractor.  Even in states and provinces that have no mandatory education requirements, a contractor’s failure to keep current in the field will diminish the contractor’s credibility if he ever testifies in court or at a deposition.  A judge or jury is far more likely to find a contractor’s testimony persuasive if the contractor regularly takes Continuing Education classes.
* **Finally, like it or not, contractors must sometimes testify as experts.**  Failure to keep current in the field could result in a ruling that disqualifies the contractor as an expert altogether.

Tip: Continuing education doesn’t always have to be directly related to your service. Being knowledgeable about related services and what your subcontractors do can help you company succeed.

**InterNACHI’s Estimated Life Expectancy**

The following chart details the predicted life expectancy of appliances, products, materials, systems and components.

**Contractors advising their clients should note that these life expectancies have been determined through research and testing based on regular recommended maintenance and conditions of normal wear and tear, and not extreme weather (or other) conditions, neglect, over-use or abuse.  Therefore, they should be used as guidelines only, and not relied upon as guarantees or warranties.**

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

Surface preparation and paint quality are the most important determinants of a paint's life expectancy. Ultraviolet (UV) rays via sunshine can shorten life expectancy.  Additionally, conditions of high humidity indoors or outdoors can affect the lifespan of these components, which is why they should be inspected and maintained seasonally.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **ADHESIVES, CAULK & PAINTS** | **YEARS** |
| Caulking (interior & exterior) | 5 to 10 |
| Construction Glue | 20+ |
| Paint (exterior) | 7 to 10 |
| Paint (interior) | 10 to 15 |
| Roofing Adhesives/Cements | 15+ |
| Sealants | 8 |
| Stains | 3 to 8 |

Appliance life expectancy depends to a great extent on the use it receives. Furthermore, consumers often replace appliances long before they become worn out due to changes in styling, technology and consumer preferences.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **APPLIANCES** | **YEARS** |
| Air Conditioner (window) | 5 to 7 |
| Compactor (trash) | 6 |
| Dehumidifier | 8 |
| Dishwasher | 9 |
| Disposal (food waste) | 12 |
| Dryer Vent  (plastic) | 5 |
| Dryer Vent  (steel) | 20 |
| Dryer (clothes) | 13 |
| Exhaust Fans | 10 |
| Freezer | 10 to 20 |
| Gas Oven | 10 to 18 |
| Hand Dryer | 10 to 12 |
| Humidifier (portable) | 8 |
| Microwave Oven | 9 |
| Range/Oven Hood | 14 |
| Electric Range | 13 to 15 |
| Gas Range | 15 to 17 |
| Refrigerator | 9 to 13 |
| Swamp Cooler | 5 to 15 |
| Washing Machine | 5 to 15 |
| Whole-House Vacuum System | 20 |

Modern kitchens today are larger and more elaborate.  Together with the family room, they now form the “great room.”

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| --- | --- |
| **CABINETRY & STORAGE** | **YEARS** |
| Bathroom Cabinets | 50+ |
| Closet Shelves | 100+ |
| Entertainment Center/Home Office | 10 |
| Garage/Laundry Cabinets | 70+ |
| Kitchen Cabinets | 50 |
| Medicine Cabinet | 25+ |
| Modular (stock manufacturing-type) | 50 |

Walls and ceilings last the full lifespan of the home.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **CEILINGS & WALLS** | **YEARS** |
| Acoustical Tile Ceiling | 40+ (older than 25 years may contain asbestos) |
| Ceramic Tile | 70+ |
| Concrete | 75+ |
| Gypsum | 75 |
| Wood Paneling | 20 to 50 |
| Suspended Ceiling | 25+ |

Natural stone countertops, which are less expensive than they were just a few years ago, are becoming more popular, and one can expect them to last a lifetime. Cultured marble countertops have a shorter life expectancy, however.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **COUNTERTOPS** | **YEARS** |
| Concrete | 50 |
| Cultured Marble | 20 |
| Natural Stone | 100+ |
| Laminate | 20 to 30 |
| Resin | 10+ |
| Tile | 100+ |
| Wood | 100+ |

Decks are exposed to a wide range of conditions in different climates, from wind and hail in some areas, to relatively consistent, dry weather in others. See FASTENERS & STEEL section for fasteners.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **DECKS** | **YEARS** |
| Deck Planks | 15 |
| Composite | 8 to 25 |
| Structural Wood | 10 to 30 |

Exterior fiberglass, steel and wood doors will last as long as the house, while vinyl and screen doors have a shorter life expectancy. The gaskets/weatherstripping of exterior doors may have to be replaced every 5 to 8 years.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **DOORS** | **YEARS** |
| Closet (interior) | 100+ |
| Fiberglass (exterior) | 100+ |
| Fire-Rated Steel (exterior) | 100+ |
| French (interior) | 30 to 50 |
| Screen (exterior) | 30 |
| Sliding Glass/Patio (exterior) | 20 (for roller wheel/track repair/replacement) |
| Vinyl (exterior) | 20 |
| Wood (exterior) | 100+ |
| Wood (hollow-core interior) | 20 to 30 |
| Wood (solid-core interior) | 30 to 100+ |

Copper-plated wiring, copper-clad aluminum, and bare copper wiring are expected to last a lifetime, whereas electrical accessories and lighting controls, such as dimmer switches, may need to be replaced after 10 years.  GFCIs could last 30 years, but much less if tripped regularly.

Remember that faulty, damaged or overloaded electrical circuits or equipment are the leading cause of house fires, so they should be inspected regularly and repaired or updated as needed.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **ELECTRICAL** | **YEARS** |
| Accessories | 10+ |
| Arc-Fault Circuit Interrupters (AFCIs) | 30 |
| Bare Copper | 100+ |
| Bulbs (compact fluorescent) | 8,000 to 10,000+ hours |
| Bulbs (halogen) | 4,000 to 8,000+ hours |
| Bulbs (incandescent) | 1,000 to 2,000+ hours |
| Bulbs (LED) | 30,000 to 50,000+ hours |
| Copper-Clad Aluminum | 100+ |
| Copper-Plated | 100+ |
| Fixtures | 40 |
| Ground-Fault Circuit Interrupters (GFCIs) | up to 30 |
| Lighting Controls | 30+ |
| Residential Propane Backup Generators | 12 |
| Service Panel | 60 |
| Solar Panels | 20 to 30 |
| Solar System Batteries | 3 to 12 |
| Wind Turbine Generators | 20 |

Floor and roof trusses and laminated strand lumber are durable household components, and engineered trim may last 30 years.

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| --- | --- |
| **ENGINEERED LUMBER** | **YEARS** |
| Engineered Joists | 80+ |
| Laminated Strand Lumber | 100+ |
| Laminated Veneer Lumber | 80+ |
| Trusses | 100+ |

Fastener manufacturers do not give lifespans for their products because they vary too much based on where the fasteners are installed in a home, the materials in which they're installed, and the local climate and environment.  However, inspectors can use the guidelines below to make educated judgments about the materials they inspect.

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| --- | --- |
| **FASTENERS, CONNECTORS & STEEL** | **YEARS** |
| Adjustable Steel Columns | 50+ |
| Fasteners (bright) | 25 to 60 |
| Fasteners (copper) | 65 to 80+ |
| Fasteners (galvanized) | 10+ |
| Fasteners (electro-galvanized) | 15 to 45 |
| Fasteners (hot-dipped galvanized) | 35 to 60 |
| Fasteners (stainless) | 65 to 100+ |
| Steel Beams | 200+ |
| Steel Columns | 100+ |
| Steel Plates | 100+ |

Flooring life is dependent on maintenance and the amount of foot traffic the floor endures.

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| --- | --- |
| **FLOORING** | **YEARS** |
| All Wood Floors | 100+ |
| Bamboo | 100+ |
| Brick Pavers | 100+ |
| Carpet | 8 to 10 |
| Concrete | 50+ |
| Engineered Wood | 50+ |
| Exotic Wood | 100+ |
| Granite | 100+ |
| Laminate | 15 to 25 |
| Linoleum | 25 |
| Marble | 100+ |
| Other Domestic Wood | 100+ |
| Slate | 100 |
| Terrazzo | 75+ |
| Tile | 75 to 100 |
| Vinyl | 25 |

Concrete and poured-block footings and foundations will last a lifetime, assuming they were properly built.  Waterproofing with bituminous coating lasts 10 years, but if it cracks, it is immediately damaged.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **FOUNDATIONS** | **YEARS** |
| Baseboard Waterproofing System | 50 |
| Bituminous-Coating Waterproofing | 10 |
| Concrete Block | 100+ |
| Insulated Concrete Forms (ICFs) | 100 |
| Post and Pier | 20 to 65 |
| Post and Tensioned Slab on Grade | 100+ |
| Poured-Concrete Footings and Foundation | 100+ |
| Slab on Grade (concrete) | 100 |
| Wood Foundation | 5 to 40 |
| Permanent Wood Foundation (PWF; treated) | 75 |

Framing and structural systems have extended longevities; poured-concrete systems, timber frame houses and structural insulated panels will all last a lifetime.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **FRAMING** | **YEARS** |
| Log | 80 to 200 |
| Poured-Concrete Systems | 100+ |
| Steel | 100+ |
| Structural Insulated Panels (SIPs) | 100+ |
| Timber Frame | 100+ |

The quality and frequency of use will affect the longevity of garage doors and openers.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **GARAGES** | **YEARS** |
| Garage Doors | 20 to 25 |
| Garage Door Openers | 10 to 15 |

Home technology systems have diverse life expectancies and may have to be upgraded due to evolution in technology.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **HOME TECHNOLOGY** | **YEARS** |
| Built-In Audio | 20 |
| Carbon Monoxide Detectors\* | 5 |
| Door Bells | 45 |
| Home Automation System | 5 to 50 |
| Intercoms | 20 |
| Security System | 5 to 20 |
| Smoke/Heat Detectors\* | less than 10 |
| Wireless Home Networks | 5+ |

\* Batteries should be changed at least annually.

Thermostats may last 35 years but they are usually replaced before they fail due to technological improvements.

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| --- | --- |
| **HVAC** | **YEARS** |
| Air Conditioner (central) | 7 to 15 |
| Air Exchanger | 15 |
| Attic Fan | 15 to 25 |
| Boiler | 40 |
| Burner | 10+ |
| Ceiling Fan | 5 to 10 |
| Condenser | 8 to 20 |
| Dampers | 20+ |
| Dehumidifier | 8 |
| Diffusers, Grilles and Registers | 25 |
| Ducting | 60 to 100 |
| Electric Radiant Heater | 40 |
| Evaporator Cooler | 15 to 25 |
| Furnace | 15 to 25 |
| Gas Fireplace | 15 to 25 |
| Heat Exchanger | 10 to 15 |
| Heat Pump | 10 to 15 |
| Heat-Recovery Ventilator | 20 |
| Hot-Water and Steam-Radiant Boiler | 40 |
| Humidifier | 12 |
| Induction and Fan-Coil Units | 10 to 15 |
| Chimney Cap (concrete) | 100+ |
| Chimney Cap (metal) | 10 to 20 |
| Chimney Cap (mortar) | 15 |
| Chimney Flue Tile | 40 to 120 |
| Thermostats | 35 |
| Ventilator | 7 |

As long as they are not punctured, cut or burned and are kept dry and away from UV rays, cellulose, fiberglass and foam insulation materials will last a lifetime. This is true regardless of whether they were installed as loose-fill, housewrap or batts/rolls.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **INSULATION & INFILTRATION BARRIERS** | **YEARS** |
| Batts/Rolls | 100+ |
| Black Paper (felt paper) | 15 to 30 |
| Cellulose | 100+ |
| Fiberglass | 100+ |
| Foamboard | 100+ |
| Housewrap | 80+ |
| Liquid-Applied Membrane | 50 |
| Loose-Fill | 100+ |
| Rock Wool | 100+ |
| Wrap Tape | 80+ |

Masonry is one of the most enduring household components. Fireplaces, chimneys and brick veneers can last the lifetime of a home.

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| --- | --- |
| **MASONRY & CONCRETE** | **YEARS** |
| Brick | 100+ |
| Insulated Concrete Forms (hybrid block) | 100+ |
| Concrete Masonry Units (CMUs) | 100+ |
| Man-Made Stone | 25 |
| Masonry Sealant | 2 to 20 |
| Stone | 100+ |
| Stucco/EIFS | 50+ |
| Veneer | 100+ |

Custom millwork and stair parts will last a lifetime and are typically only upgraded for aesthetic reasons.

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| --- | --- |
| **MOLDING, MILLWORK & TRIM** | **YEARS** |
| Attic Stairs (pull-down) | 50 |
| Custom Millwork | 100+ |
| Pre-Built Stairs | 100+ |
| Stair Parts | 100+ |
| Stairs | 100+ |

The lifetime of any wood product depends heavily on moisture intrusion.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **PANELS** | **YEARS** |
| Flooring Underlayment | 25 |
| Hardboard | 40 |
| Particleboard | 60 |
| Plywood | 100 |
| Softwood | 30 |
| Oriented Strand Board (OSB) | 60 |
| Wall Panels | 100+ |

The quality of plumbing fixtures varies dramatically.  The mineral content of water can shorten the life expectancy of water heaters and clog showerheads.  Also, some finishes may require special maintenance with approved cleaning agents per the manufacturers in order to last their expected service lives.

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| --- | --- |
| **PLUMBING, FIXTURES & FAUCETS** | **YEARS** |
| ABS and PVC Waste Pipe | 50 to 80 |
| Accessible/ADA Handles | 100+ |
| Acrylic Kitchen Sink | 50 |
| Cast-Iron Bathtub | 100 |
| Cast-Iron Waste Pipe (above ground) | 60 |
| Cast-Iron Waste Pipe (below ground) | 50 to 60 |
| Concrete Waste Pipe | 100+ |
| Copper Water Lines | 70 |
| Enameled Steel Kitchen Sink | 5 to 10+ |
| Faucets and Spray Hose | 15 to 20 |
| Fiberglass Bathtub and Shower | 20 |
| Gas Lines (black steel) | 75 |
| Gas Lines (flex) | 30 |
| Hose Bibs | 20 to 30 |
| Instant (on-demand) Water Heater | 10 |
| PEX | 40 |
| Plastic Water Lines | 75 |
| Saunas/Steam Room | 15 to 20 |
| Sewer Grinder Pump | 10 |
| Shower Enclosure/Module | 50 |
| Shower Doors | 20 |
| Showerheads | 100+ (if not clogged by mineral/other deposits) |
| Soapstone Kitchen Sink | 100+ |
| Sump Pump | 7 |
| Toilet Tank Components | 5 |
| Toilets, Bidets and Urinals | 100+ |
| Vent Fan (ceiling) | 5 to 10 |
| Vessel Sink (stone, glass, porcelain, copper) | 5 to 20+ |
| Water Heater (conventional) | 6 to 12 |
| Water Line (copper) | 50 |
| Water Line (plastic) | 50 |
| Well Pump | 15 |
| Water Softener | 20 |
| Whirlpool Tub | 20 to 50 |

Radon systems have but one moving part:  the radon fan.

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| --- | --- |
| **RADON SYSTEMS** | **YEARS** |
| Air Exchanger | 15 |
| Barometric Backdraft Damper/Fresh-Air Intake | 20 |
| Caulking | 5 to 10 |
| Labeling | 25 |
| Manometer | 15 |
| Piping | 50+ |
| Radon Fan | 5 to 8 |

The life of a roof depends on local weather conditions, building and design, material quality, and adequate maintenance.  Hot climates drastically reduce asphalt shingle life.  Roofs in areas that experience severe weather, such as hail, tornadoes and/or hurricanes may also experience a shorter-than-normal lifespan overall or may incur isolated damage that requires repair in order to ensure the service life of the surrounding roofing materials.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **ROOFING** | **YEARS** |
| Aluminum Coating | 3 to 7 |
| Asphalt Shingles (3-tab) | 20 |
| Asphalt (architectural) | 30 |
| BUR (built-up roofing) | 30 |
| Cellulose Fiber | 20 |
| Clay/Concrete | 100+ |
| Coal and Tar | 30 |
| Copper | 70+ |
| EPDM (ethylene propylene diene monomer) Rubber | 15 to 25 |
| Fiber Cement | 25 |
| Green (vegetation-covered) | 5 to 40 |
| Metal | 40 to 80 |
| Modified Bitumen | 20 |
| Simulated Slate | 10 to 35 |
| Slate | 60 to 150 |
| TPO | 7 to 20 |
| Wood | 30 |

Outside siding materials typically last a lifetime.  Some exterior components may require protection through appropriate paints or sealants, as well as regular maintenance.  Also, while well-maintained and undamaged flashing can last a long time, it is their connections that tend to fail, so seasonal inspection and maintenance are strongly recommended.

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| --- | --- |
| **SIDINGS, FLASHING & ACCESSORIES** | **YEARS** |
| Aluminum Siding | 25 to 40+ |
| Aluminum Gutters, Downspouts, Soffit and Fascia | 20 to 40+ |
| Asbestos Shingle | 100 |
| Brick | 100+ |
| Cementitious | 100+ |
| Copper Downspouts | 100 |
| Copper Gutters | 50+ |
| Engineered Wood | 100+ |
| Fiber Cement | 100+ |
| Galvanized Steel Gutters/Downspouts | 20 |
| Manufactured Stone | 100+ |
| Stone | 100+ |
| Stucco/EIFS | 50+ |
| Trim | 25 |
| Vinyl Siding | 60 |
| Vinyl Gutters and Downspouts | 25+ |
| Wood/Exterior Shutters | 20 |

Site and landscaping elements have life expectancies that vary dramatically.

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| --- | --- |
| **SITE & LANDSCAPING** | **YEARS** |
| American Red Clay | 100+ |
| Asphalt Driveway | 15 to 20 |
| Brick and Concrete Patio | 15 to 25 |
| Clay Paving | 100+ |
| Concrete Walks | 40 to 50 |
| Controllers | 15 |
| Gravel Walks | 4 to 6 |
| Mulch | 1 to 2 |
| Polyvinyl Fencing | 100+ |
| Sprinkler Heads | 10 to 14 |
| Underground PVC Piping | 60+ |
| Valves | 20 |
| Wood Chips | 1 to 5 |
| Wood Fencing | 20 |

Swimming pools are comprised of many systems and components, all with varying life expectancies.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **SWIMMING POOLS** | **YEARS** |
| Concrete Shell | 25+ |
| Cover | 7 |
| Diving Board | 10 |
| Filter and Pump | 10 |
| Interior Finish | 10 to 35 |
| Vinyl Liner | 10 |
| Pool Water Heater | 8 |
| Waterline Tile | 15+ |

Aluminum windows are expected to last between 15 and 20 years, while wooden windows should last nearly 30 years.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **WINDOWS** | **YEARS** |
| Aluminum/Aluminum-Clad | 15 to 20 |
| Double-Pane | 8 to 20 |
| Skylights | 10 to 20 |
| Window Glazing | 10+ |
| Vinyl Windows | 20 to 40 |
| Wood | 30+ |

**Note**: Life expectancy varies with usage, weather, installation, maintenance and quality of materials.  This list should be used only as a general guideline and not as a guarantee or warranty regarding the performance or life expectancy of any appliance, product, system or component.

**Resources**

* International Association of Certified Home Inspectors:

[www.nachi.org](http://www.nachi.org)

* International Association of Professional Contractors:

[www.professionacontractor.org](http://www.professionacontractor.org)