

HOW TO HIRE A TRADESPERSON YOU CAN TRUST

Need a builder, electrician or plumber?
Don't just Google and hope for the best.
Here's how to find someone reliable

BY JOANNE CHRISTIE

I STARTED TO have doubts about the man I'd hired to fit my kitchen at the end of the first day. I saw that he'd failed to cut down the end panels to fit the overhead cabinets, which had resulted in a bizarre-looking array of mismatched parts.

Fast-forward a couple of days and he'd joined my workbenches together with about a centimetre of silicone and left a big gap between two base cupboards. We ended up in a heated dispute that resulted in my husband paying him the £800 quoted just to leave the building, while we were stuck with a brand new kitchen that looked like a toddler's Lego project.

The truth is we were at least partially to blame for the fiasco that saw us later having to pay a competent fitter to take the kitchen back out and refit it properly. When we were let down by the tradesman we'd originally booked to fit the kitchen – after having already ripped out our old one – we hastily hired someone after asking around at a local building site.



I know now that alarm bells should have been ringing when he said he was able to start the day after we met – most good tradespeople are booked weeks in advance and are unlikely to be able to take on jobs such as fitting a kitchen at no notice – but having been *sans* kitchen for a couple of weeks, we skipped the checking of credentials, references or even, I'm embarrassed to say, last name.

Our approach was clearly the wrong way to find a tradesperson, and while there are rogue traders who talk a good game, there are also many more good tradespeople who charge a reasonable price if you know where to look.

WORD OF MOUTH

As with so many things in life, the best way to get a good tradesperson is to ask friends and acquaintances for a recommendation. If that turns up nothing, try contacting any tradespeople you have already used to ask if they can help. Chances are your trusty electrician or plumber will probably have worked with a few other tradespeople on local jobs and may have some good contacts.

It's also worth looking through any documents you received when you bought your property – while rifling through mine at a former house, I found a gas service check and chimney sweep receipt that pointed me towards tradespeople the former owner had used. Hang on to any warranties too – a damp-proof course warranty issued 20 years ago saved me £400 when I found a damp patch on my kitchen wall.



Four ways to cut costs

Without compromising on quality, there are still ways you can keep costs down:

1 Project-manage work yourself. This isn't for the faint-hearted or time-poor, but if, for example, you hire each individual tradesperson (for example, plasterer, electrician, plumber) yourself for a kitchen or bathroom renovation, you'll invariably pay less than if you pay someone to oversee the whole job.

2 Find local tradespeople who operate on a small scale and don't earn enough to have to be VAT registered. You can legitimately save yourself 20%.

3 Be flexible. I got a good price on having a fitted wardrobe made by a joiner by agreeing that he could come over on a weekend to fit it, thus allowing him to work on another job during the week.

4 Hire your own kitchen or bathroom fitter – stores such as Ikea and B&Q offer fitting services, but you can get a cheaper deal by hiring your own fitter.



SPECIALIST WEBSITES

If you're still at a loss, there is a plethora of information online, but don't just rely on Google.

A good place to start is TrustMark (Trustmark.org.uk), which provides a searchable database of tradespeople who meet government-endorsed standards. The downside is that there aren't many customer reviews on the site, although you do have peace of mind that all the tradespeople have met stringent criteria, which includes financial audits and on-site inspections. TrustMark also offers an 'escrow service' that allows you to deposit money into the scheme. The consumer is guaranteed to receive the work promised and the tradesman is guaranteed to receive 100% payment on completing the project once the consumer is happy with the work.

Trading Standards also offers a directory of approved tradespeople via its Buywithconfidence.gov.uk site, although, again, reviews are fairly scarce.

Which? Trusted traders is another endorsement scheme that recognises reputable traders who pass a rigorous assessment process, including references and an interview.

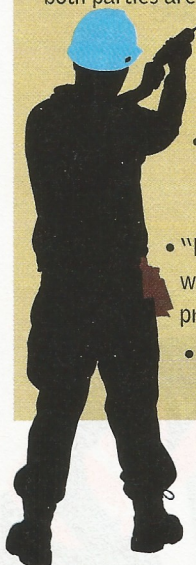
There are also several large commercial sites set up to connect homeowners with tradespeople, and while reviews are more plentiful, you need to understand the differences between the types of site.

First, there are lead-generating sites such as RatedPeople.com and MyBuilder.com. These give you the opportunity to detail the work you need done online, which they then send to a huge range of registered tradespeople, who can buy your contact details if they're interested and get in touch to give you a quote.

Protect yourself: the do's and don'ts

TrustMark chief executive Simon Ayers provides some handy tips on what to do and what not to do.

- "Don't pay any money up front. Sometimes a tradesperson will request 50% before they even turn up. Our advice is to never pay that. If a tradesperson wants assurances they will be paid, we recommend using an escrow service so both parties are covered."
- "Don't entertain cold callers. If somebody knocks on your door offering to work, say no. This is the way most rogue traders operate."
- "Do pay at least £100 by credit card when you do pay, that way you have extra protection under the Consumer Credit Act."
- "Do check the credentials of people and make sure they are who they say they are. You should also ask for references of previous customers."
- "Do have a contract. Without one, trying to prove what you said and when you said it is a really difficult task."



Unfortunately, you have no control over who gets your information – once someone has purchased your details, you'll be able to check them out and read their reviews, but if they're not suitable you'll have to keep re-posting until you get someone who is. With RatedPeople.com, you also have to specify your budget, which can be tricky if you're in the early stages of researching the cost.

The plus side is that if you need something done fast, then you'll likely find someone who matches your needs – tradespeople are hardly likely to buy your details if they aren't available.



“Without a contract, trying to prove what you said and when you said it is a difficult task”

The other main type of site is a subscription-based service, such as Checkatrade.com or TrustATrader.com, where you can type in your postcode and search for local tradespeople. The advantage to these sites is that you can check out their reviews, qualifications and work before you contact them and you won't be dealing with unsolicited calls. The disadvantage is that you could call many tradespeople before finding one that is available.

Some sites check the qualifications of traders, while others only check their identity. Whichever site you use, it's a good idea to ask anyone you're thinking about hiring to prove their credentials. Don't just take them as given because the site says they have them — there's no reason for a qualified tradesperson to be hesitant about providing proof.

If you do have a problem with a tradesperson you are introduced to via one of these sites, make sure you make a complaint — processes vary (and some are very good), but at the very least they should contact the tradesperson in question to try to resolve your issue.

GETTING THE BEST PRICE

Make a list of everything you want done, and put out some feelers. It can be hard to get a ballpark price for building work, but a few initial calls to tradespeople or associations covering a particular trade can be a good place to start.

Few will give you a definitive price over the phone — and you should be wary of anyone that does — but often you can get a general idea of the price of, for example, fitting 20 kitchen units or changing a few roof tiles. Buildingsheriff.com is a good website for initial price research, although be aware that regional variations are huge.

Always get at least three quotes, and make sure you're comparing like for like when it comes to these quotes. Find out which brands tradespeople are using, which parts of the job they are covering and which materials they are providing. Don't always go for the cheapest quote — it may mean you're settling for lower quality or using someone who doesn't have the right experience or qualifications.

Above all, try not to abandon all common sense if you find yourself in a desperate situation like we did — even if you've ended up with no kitchen or your boiler has broken down in the middle of winter, don't skip the usual steps when finding someone to repair it or you may end up waiting longer and paying more. ◆

JOANNE CHRISTIE is a freelance journalist who has written for *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*

What to do when it all goes wrong

If you're not happy with a tradesperson's work, the first thing you should do is contact them to discuss it. Even if you come to an agreement to resolve the issue over the phone, it's a good idea to follow this up in writing.

If you're not satisfied or the tradesperson doesn't respond, contact any trade association they belong to, as well as any website you used to source them, to see if there is a dispute resolution scheme you can make use of. Alternatively, you could complain to the Consumer Ombudsman, providing you have given the tradesperson a reasonable period of time to rectify the issue.

If neither of the above resolves your issue, you can take action via the courts, although this can be costly and time consuming so is best seen as a last resort.

