

Selecting a Hardscaping Contractor

You have decided to invest in an outdoor hardscaping project. After careful consideration, you have decided to hire a professional to implement it. Now you must pick the specific contractor. The hardscaping industry offers a huge selection of contractors, but not all of them are qualified to do your specific project. Unfortunately, it is easy to make a poor choice; so, the selection process is critical.

You will need to make two decisions:

- (1) Who should bid? and
- (2) Which of the bidders will you hire?

You should be looking for about three contractors to bid on your job. Three bids allow you to determine high, low and average cost. More than three is unfair to the contractors as they will bid at no cost to you but at significant cost to themselves. And more bids also unnecessarily complicates your decision. But you are about to make a significant investment in your home, so, you want a great “short list.”

Factors to consider in selecting the short list of bidders:

1. ***Understand the value of a professional hardscaping contractor.*** You may know a good general contractor (GC) who built your house or remodeled your basement; but, unless he has explicitly implemented hardscaping projects, he is not a hardscaping contractor. If you have a lot of confidence in a specific GC *and are willing to pay a premium for his management skills*, then you could consider hiring the GC to find and manage a good subcontractor. Just make sure that the GC has managed this type of project before. In this scenario, you do not need a bid process as you are selecting a GC based on past experience and personal confidence.

You may have a great landscaper who mows your lawn, fertilizes, plants, trims or prunes; but, unless he has explicitly implemented hardscaping projects, he is not a hardscaping contractor. If you are willing to reduce your costs by allowing a landscaper to learn on the job, and if you have confidence in the landscaper's commitment to finding out the right way to do the work, then you could consider your landscaper. But this approach has a great deal of risk.

However, most often, you will be looking for a professional hardscaping contractor who has the full set of skills and experience that completing a successful project requires.

- 2. Get a referral / reference.** Each contractor on your short list should have good references. If relying on a friend or neighbor for a referral, make sure the project that inspired the referral was completed prior to the prior winter, i.e., the projects needs to have survived one freeze-thaw cycle intact. A project can look great the month after completion and not so good a year later. Freeze-thaw will expose errors made below the surface in the sub-base and base of the project.

Most manufacturers have an authorized contractor program from which you may obtain referrals. These referral lists are usually accessible on the manufacturer's website or by completing a form on the website which will trigger a referral email. The degree of screening that manufacturers perform prior to accepting contractors into their authorized programs varies. Consequently, additional references beyond a manufacturer's referral list are recommended.

Dealers also vary in how they provide referrals. If relying on a dealer reference, make sure the dealer screens his referral list. At Woodward Landscape Supply, for example, we evaluate the work of the contractors we recommend at their jobsites over multiple visits, making sure they follow accepted hardscaping standards and that they leave the job in excellent condition. We also monitor customer feedback and remove contractors from our list if valid complaints come to our attention.

- 3. Confirm specific expertise.** During your initial conversation with each name on your short list, make sure they have the expertise you need for all elements of your project. For example, pool decks have some unique below-ground issues; masonry projects such as veneer require unique skills and tools; flagstone has very different installation characteristics than manufactured pavers. If you know you are going to need a special skill, make sure you ask if the contractor has that experience. If the special element is a small portion of the project, it is reasonable for a contractor to subcontract that element. If the specialty skill is a major portion of the project, it should also be a major portion of the contractor's portfolio.

Design is also a specialized skill. If you want your contractor to provide a design or to evaluate and refine one you already have, make sure they do design work. A formal design may be a chargeable item. Frequently that charge is credited back against the final project cost if the contractor who provided the design is selected as the installer.

- 4. Validate license.** Licensing requirements vary by state. Check out local laws and make sure your candidates comply. In Pennsylvania, the Home Improvement Consumer Protection Act requires most home improvement contractors to register with the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office. These contractors must maintain

minimum insurance coverage and utilize contracts that comply with a number of consumer protection requirements specified in this law. The Attorney General's Bureau of Consumer Protection is responsible for enforcement of these requirements.

5. **Check for local coverage.** Make sure that the commute to your property is financially attractive for the contractors you select. If too far, the cost of getting their crew to and from your location can make the project unnecessarily expensive.
6. **Check out timing.** Good contractors will have backlogs off and on throughout the hardscaping season. Determine if the contractors you are interested in are going to be available to do the work on a schedule that meets your needs

Using these guidelines, you will pick your short list. Meet with each contractor to discuss the project and await your bids. Once you have the bids in hand, the following factors should be considered in making your final decision:

1. **Cost.** If one bid is especially low, beware! Make sure you understand what that contractor is *not* including. If one bid is especially high, find out why. Did that contractor consider something relevant that the others missed? Exceptionally low bids usually have left out something really important.
2. **Warranty.** Proposals should offer a minimum three-year warranty.
3. **Insurance.** Proof of liability insurance should be a requirement. Incidents are rare in this industry, but accidents do happen. And surprises may lurk beneath the surface that could lead to unplanned problems.
4. **Material Selection.** The proposal / contract can be written in one of two ways:
 - a. If you have already selected the materials, the agreement should explicitly identify your choices.
 - b. If you have not yet finalized your choices, the agreement will assume a basic product and final pricing must be adjusted to reflect your ultimate product choice. The contract should both require you to make your final choice within a specific timeframe and provide you an understanding of what type of material is assumed in the baseline proposal.
5. **Construction Issues.** The agreement should explicitly cover the contractor's responsibility for removing and disposing of any excess excavated material as well as his responsibility for final clean up and ground repair. If you expect finishing landscaping, the agreement should cover that as well.

- 6. Comfort.** Finally, is the contractor a person whom you feel comfortable having work at your home unsupervised? This is a very individual and subjective issue, but you will develop rapport and trust with some individuals and not with others. You need to consider your comfort level in making your final decision.

If you have any questions about anything in this paper, feel free to contact Woodward Landscape Supply by phone, fax or email. Good luck with your project!

Woodward Landscape Supply, Inc.

661 Schuylkill Road
Phoenixville, PA 19460

610-983-9810 store
610-983-0139 fax
info@woodwardls.com