



## How to Identify a Good Heating and Cooling Contractor

When shopping for new HVAC equipment the most important decision you'll make is choosing the right installing contractor. Equipment installed improperly will result in your system not keeping you as comfortable as expected, not saving as much (if anything) on your utilities, and even worse the system might fail entirely after only a few short years.

To ensure you get the comfort and efficiency you expect, make sure to choose a contractor who will:

- ✓ properly size the equipment for your home,
- ✓ uncover, and more importantly solve, any pre-existing problems with your duct system, house insulation or air leakage, and
- ✓ install the equipment properly.

By performing our own market research, we have discovered that many contractors skip steps that are vital to determining the system that will meet and/or exceed your needs. Since we understand most customers will often receive several bids before making a decision, here are 10 tips to help you make sure the other companies aren't cutting corners in your system replacement process.

### 1. All contractors are not "Pretty Much the Same"

Most companies simply do not invest enough time initially and for ongoing staff training. When it comes to diagnosing problems, they are generally behind the times which pose problems with today's more complicated systems. When it comes to duct systems and house insulation, most contractors aren't aware of all the common defects that affect your comfort and indoor air quality. Many residential HVAC companies do not pay high enough wages to attract the best technicians and don't have all of the state of the art tools and testing

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instruments needed to get the job done right. If the company does not have the proper tools for testing, they may not discover hidden issues at the end of an installation. Research shows, the typical residential HVAC system

only operates at 57% of equipment rated capacity. Be sure to ask your salesperson how they will be able to prove the equipment they installed is running as efficiently as they promised.

Although the upfront cost may seem lower, these run of the mill contractors' end up being more expensive in the long run.

### 2. A "Name Brand" Dealer is not automatically a good choice

Imagine for a moment going to a car dealership and buying a Porsche sports car. However, on the day of the delivery it showed up to your home in a box for assembly. Now you would have purchased a Porsche but at this point who assembles it would become very important. In order for the heating and air conditioning equipment you purchased to perform as promised, the installation process is just as important.

Choosing a dealer for one of the best known national brands of equipment **does not** automatically guarantee you'll get a contractor that understands all the details that goes into installing that equipment.

### 3. Only choose a contractor who quotes a price after evaluations and testing

When looking for a new contractor, look for one who offers and recommends a Negative Pressure Diagnostic test.

This test includes:

- ✓ a computerized equipment sizing calculation,
- ✓ home insulation analysis,
- ✓ an Infiltrometer blower door test, and
- ✓ duct system air flow and leakage diagnostics.

Any contractor who proceeds to quote a price for replacing equipment or promises savings on your utility bill without performing, or at least recommending these important diagnostic steps should be automatically rejected.

These contractors may only be interested in “selling you a metal box” rather than truly solving your problems. Did you know that a 15% air leak from a 120 degree attic can reduce efficiency by 50%!

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If someone promises to improve comfort, airflow, or savings without looking at all the factors, ask them to prove how this is possible.

#### **4. Always ask for the load calculation**

Many contractors will try to minimize the importance of a proper sizing calculation and diagnostic testing. They'll say *“I've done hundreds of houses just like this one. I don't need to go through all those measurements and tests.”* DON'T BELIEVE IT! No two houses or duct systems are exactly the same, even if they were when they were originally built, the way the system runs and how the owners live will change everything.

Some contractors will install what they have available or left over in their warehouse. Oversized and undersized equipment runs less efficiently, is unable to reach comfort levels, and will fail much sooner than properly sized equipment. Something you should keep in mind when purchasing new equipment is, the State of Illinois requires all new heating and cooling systems be sized properly using an approved calculation methodology. Be sure to ask your salesperson to show you his or her calculations for your *SPECIFIC* home.

#### **5. Choose a contractor who asks a lot of questions**

Unfortunately, many people assume pre-existing comfort, dust, noise or unhealthy air problems will be automatically solved by installing a new system. These problems are all solvable, but just replacing equipment won't do it. A good contractor is committed to 100% customer satisfaction, to achieve this, they need information. You and your family are the best source for information on the comfort issues in your home. These good contractors will start by asking questions about the areas that have been hard to heat and cool, if the air is too dry or too humid, about how the old system performed (or didn't), and what you're really looking for in a new system.

If you were buying a car, you wouldn't buy whatever vehicle the salesperson felt like selling you. You would have a buying criteria specific with what fits your needs. Don't let a salesperson install equipment without first determining what your needs and wants for a new system are.

#### **6. It's important to understand all of the options available**

It is very important that all adults who live in your home participate in the initial interview and inspection since everyone's perception of comfort is different. Not only are everyone's individual comfort needs important, but there is such a wide array of equipment options, what is important to one may not be to another. There are different quality grades and brands, different efficiency levels, air filtration and humidity control options, ventilation improvements, duct repairs, insulation upgrades and even payment options. This decision requires significant education, because of the large amount of information it is important that everyone that will be involved in the decision be present. A new system is a much bigger decision than most people realize.

#### **7. Don't focus only on initial costs and don't assume the lowest priced company is the one you should hire**

Some people are only concerned by the upfront costs of doing the job, especially if it is an unplanned expense. It's tempting to spend as little as possible on new equipment, but remember properly installed new high efficiency systems, when combined with repairs to the ducts, regularly do improve utility bills. It's usually worth investing more upfront, with a quality contractor, in order to reduce the long term costs of ownership.

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While price matters, don't let the initial price be the only consideration when choosing a heating and cooling contractor. Something as small as getting the refrigerant charge right has an effect on the system; did you

know that a 23% refrigerant undercharge could result in a 52% efficiency loss.

As with most things in life, price is usually an indication of quality. High quality is essential for new heating and cooling systems. The long term costs to **own** it usually far exceeds the initial cost to **buy** it. It is our experience that the low priced contractor is rarely the best value.

### **8. Only choose a contractor who has the proper instruments**

A good contractor will not only recommend "testing before" during the initial diagnostic process, he will also recommend "testing after." Many contractors will simply "turn on" your new system after it has been installed, if it works, they're job is done and they're on their way. However, a good contractor will do similar tests to what they did initially. They will make sure the issues they found have been solved, and if they haven't been, make adjustments until they are corrected. For example, all of our gas fired appliances are dialed in using combustion analyzers to ensure proper firing.

### **9. Be wary of long term labor warranties**

A lot of contractors are enticing customers with long term labor warranties. We've seen companies offer 10, 15, 20 and even lifetime labor warranties. A couple things to consider when presented with this option; first, if the company's service level decreases you will still have to call them to take advantage of the warranty you paid for. Second, if the company goes out of business the warranty, which again, you paid for, is worth nothing.

A lot of companies can offer a long term warranty knowing that they most likely won't have to honor it. If you are offered one of these warranties, make sure you get the details, and get them in writing. Don't let an extended warranty distract you from focusing on what is most important. Getting what you paid for.

### **10. Don't try to buy a new system over the phone**

Finally, **DO NOT** try to buy a new system by collecting bids over the telephone. In order to ensure 100% customer satisfaction, honest, reputable companies need to meet with you, and will want to perform diagnostic testing on your home. On the contrary, you should be extremely wary of any contractor that is willing to give you a price over the phone.

If you want to get the best value for your money, solve existing discomfort or dust problems, and end up with a new comfort system you will be proud to own and enjoy for many years to come, take the time to identify one of the few contractors who can really put your new system in right.