

**Need Your Building Fixed?
(Secrets to Obtaining Bids)
By Jason Ritchmond**

JASON RITCHMOND'S GUIDE TO CONTRACTING QUALITY PROPERTY CONSTRUCTION SERVICE: Old or new, Class A to Class D, there are many areas of construction and related services that occur on any given property on a daily basis. With these services, there is an extensive range of issues that develop, and an equally vast range of potential solutions. Education in and awareness of how construction issues impact operations on existing properties is critical for successful implementation and task completion.

Too often, the request for a bid starts like this: "I needed a bid two weeks ago. I don't really have a scope or guideline for you to go by. Can you do it for a minimal amount? And by the way, fax that estimate to me in 5 minutes."

Of course, that's an exaggeration, but almost everyone can relate to the experience. But to make the process less painful on both sides of the property construction equation, I thought it would be wise to go through the different types of construction work on a property and reveal some little secrets to help property management (as well as to keep us contractors honest).

One: Start with professional contractors. Check their track records, get references, review the insurance requirements, etc.

Two: Is there a scope? Define the direction of your project. An understanding of the scope and at least some form of verbal direction are critical when looking at any job. There are times when a bad job is done because someone hired the wrong guy, and there are times when an insufficient job was done because better direction was not given.

There are some management companies that have facilities or construction staff that handle project planning and requests for proposals. Many of these professionals are extremely skilled in what they do. However, it is my experience that a property manager knows the property better than anyone else. As a property manager, be proactive in what needs to be done.

Three: Have a network of at least three contractors you can trust. This means they are not fly by night operations that soon will be out of business. They have a good track record within the industry. Don't get burned. If you have a contractor you trust, they should service you on all your needs and not just show up for the "big jobs."

Four: Keep your contractors honest. Get them a scope and compare unit pricing, paint grades, material grades, type of nails used, etc. All of these things affect the price. Make sure the estimate you get is itemized down to the last detail, and then compare your estimates carefully. Price isn't always the best factor on which to base your decision.

Time Frame and Bid Preparation

If there is not an official scope for work, it can take days to weeks to complete a bid for a customer. Compile and provide all of the information you can about a proposed job so your contractor can provide a thorough estimate. If you have a contractor who consistently tells you he is going to give you a bid and does not, you might want to add more contractors to your vendor list.

Time Frame and Work Completion

Ask your contractors how long it will take to do the work. And be realistic in work completion time expectancy. Obviously, more complex projects will take more time. Simple projects won't take as long.

Avoid using contractors who regularly under-estimate the time it will take to complete complex projects, and don't hire a guy who works at a turtle's pace. On a large job with a slow construction team, you run the risk that the contractor will run out of money or the company and staff are not truly qualified.

Don't rush a good job, but don't put up with consistent "no shows" by the contractor. If the work amount changes, so should your time frame. Realize this and make amendments or allowances for it in the formal contract.

Pricing

You usually get what you pay for, so be honest about what you want and what you expect. If you want the Volkswagen instead of the Cadillac, don't be afraid to tell your contractor. It will help keep both of you from wasting time. If you want the Cadillac, make sure and inform him/her of what options you want from the beginning, when you scope out the project.

Exterior Painting

This one is one of the trickiest aspects of construction, and it is how a customer can get duped. Just like artwork, there are kids' elementary school water coloring kits and then there are the professional-grade paints of real artists. Which one do you want on your building?

It amazes me – that with the high humidity, mildew problems, and how easy wood rots that people are not more well informed and that they do not use better grade paints on their exteriors. We have started to give people options on paint grades, and we always tell them the product brand as well as the product number. If the customer does not ask for better paint grade, and the contractor must low-bid to get the work, which type paint do you think he will be using? Like the aforementioned difference between the Volkswagen and the Cadillac, be clear and specify the paint grade you want.

If product numbers get you confused, don't feel left out. There are a million different products and paint grades on the market. Ask to have a paint manufacturer's representative visit your property to write specifications and make recommendations addressing paint, application and rotten wood. If not, you probably are in for a "Band Aid" job that won't last more than a year.

Primer is a prime issue, too. Like with paint, there are different primer grades, and because primer is the foundation for your finish paint, it is important that the products work well together and are of comparable quality.

You need to ask your contractor whether they are using (or if they recommend) latex or acrylic primer. Ask if they plan on priming both sides or only one side of the painted surfaces? Are they priming wood before or after it goes up on the building? How does the primer manufacturer recommend that the product be used? What does the paint manufacturer recommend? And what about the surface to which the products are being applied – what does that surface require? The answers to these questions impact pricing, and they impact the quality of the job.

Exterior Carpentry

This is a nearly universal rule: You ask three contractors to walk a property for a bid for carpentry work. Three carpentry scopes are written. What does this tell you? It is not going to be an "apples to apples" estimate.

There will be differences in material grades, and that is a significant factor in carpentry work. Does each include treated trim materials or yellow pine that will be rotten in a year? Are the contractors replacing the felt or substrate, or will that be a change order waiting to happen? Are they using number two or number three grade wood, or is it cedar?

Treated wood and cedar are recommended for trim boards, unless you are doing a Hardy product installation. If the wood on your property is at least 50 percent rotten, do a full Hardy replacement job.

To get the apples to apples estimate, pick one of the estimates that you feel more comfortable with and allow the other contractors to bid off of it. Do not disqualify the others immediately if they are reasonably close – especially if they have walked your entire property.

Nothing upsets contractors more than being used and not given the opportunity to get the job. Show them equal respect and give the work to the contractor who you feel is the best fit for your company and the job you want done. You will be happier with the final product.

Installation Quality and Workmanship

Examine your contractor's work. Are all trim boards cut with a 45 degree cut at the end? If not, water penetration is going to start the rotting process early. The butt joints of sheet siding should be flashed and caulked. If they are only caulked get ready for water penetration. Typically they are flashed with Z flashing or H Molding.

Are the nailing patterns right or does it look like a job that was done by someone who does not know what they're doing? Most lap siding should be blind nailed (where you don't see the nails). If they have to nail it where you do see, the nails need to be counter sunk. Also, don't let your painter caulk those holes; he should putty them for a smoother finish. Quality starts with the little things.

Carpentry Variances

When doing a large rehab, you need to set aside at least five to 10 percent of the overall carpentry budget for "what ifs" – those hidden problems and undiscovered opportunities that are revealed in the construction process.

To the greatest extent possible, have your contractor give you unit prices on the "what ifs" before the job begins. That way they cannot pull the typical low ball and gouge technique. These "what ifs" usually occur on larger carpentry-related jobs and it is important to be prepared.

If your company will not tolerate change orders at all, then this variance amount should somehow be incorporated in to the bid and based on actual quantities of different lumber types. Otherwise, you may want to open a few walls to see what you are in for before the work begins.

There is no need for the customer to get gouged or for the contractor to be burned. We are all professionals and being prepared pays off in the end.

Balcony Work

If you are contracting out balcony repair work, make sure your contractor has the proper experience. Someone can get severely injured on this type of job – not just the construction worker, but the property staff or a resident. It is critical for the contractor to communicate with the residents on accessibility when doing balcony work.

An important item is that the unit be accessible to the resident in the morning and from 5 p.m. and 6 p.m., when the resident is usually coming home. There is nothing more frustrating to a resident and apartment personnel than not being able to enter one's home.

Fire and Floor Restoration

Do you need a cover up? Do you have someone to call in emergency situations? Be sure that you do. A few minutes can make a big difference. Have a plan laid out for all emergencies.

In a flood, remove the wet stuff immediately. This will prevent items and carpet from molding and the horrible smell that follows. Being proactive will save you time and money in the end.

When Sheetrock gets wet, remove the portion that is soaked to air out the inside of the wall and to avoid the big "M" word – mold. If an insurance adjuster is going to be involved, then make sure the scope is accurate. Some items are often missed, so don't assume that the adjuster has included everything.

Have a contractor or contractors you feel confident with meet the adjuster on the property and stand for you while going over the prospected scope. You can pay the five percent or more out of your pocket to a public adjuster, or you can save that money for your deductible.

Roofing

Is your contractor certified? Do you know what brand of roofing materials they are using? Some customers say, "I just want a 20-year shingle." We know that the low-bidding contractor will most often win the job, but there are "20 year shingles" out there that are substandard and extremely cheap. Do you want that on your property?

Do a little research and specify the brand you want. Have the manufacturer's representative involved for warranty applications. Once you have the brand you want, all your contractors should bid using the

same product specifications. Address underlayment or application styles and make sure that is included in the bid.

You don't have a basis for accurate comparison unless the bids you receive are based on comparable materials and methods. You have to ask: will the bid be with 30-pound or 15-pound felt? Will it be a modified or built-up roof? Mop down or torch down? One-ply, two-ply or three-ply?

Roofing Tidbits

When installing a flat roof, do not go with a one-ply roof. Also do not install a roof without addressing the low spots. Mop-down roofs cost a little more but will typically last longer. Address flashings when replacing a roof, including those at siding areas.

And watch those roofers! They might try to do a lay-over in areas you might not see instead of tearing the roofing down to the deck. Also, they need to clean up. Nails can easily wind up puncturing your and your residents' tires.

Parking Lots and Sidewalks

Make sure your contractor knows the three S's: Safety cones (barricades), saw cut and strength (psi) – these are important items when repairing and pouring concrete.

Make sure your contractor is not pouring concrete when the chance of rain is 40 percent or more. Concrete that has been rained on looks bad. Ensure that they install expansion joints; otherwise your new concrete will soon crack. Ask them if there is steel or wire mesh in the concrete to help support the concrete.

General Checks and Balances

Effective completion of this entire process is the key to getting the work you want. It's based on proper preparation, professionalism on both sides and quality assurance. It is important that we maintain a level of professionalism in our industry, and that we educate each other on customer needs and construction knowledge. What you don't know can hurt you.

If you are unhappy about how construction services on your property are being handled, voice your opinion. I have seen greater efficiency and professionalism develop at various management companies because of people getting tired of the good ole boy, bad work syndromes and taking action. You deserve awesome service and to be educated by your contractor on what they are doing for the money you are paying. You shouldn't waste one dollar on bad work, so don't settle for anything less than the quality you want. It doesn't have to be a pain in the neck.

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