

HOMEOWNER TIP

When was the last time you checked the vents on all the natural gas appliances and equipment in your home? Carbon monoxide poisoning is a common cause of fatalities in the home. There have been recalls on some vents, especially those made of plastic (for exact models, check the Consumer Protection Safety Commission Web site, www.cpsc.gov). Vents can come loose and deteriorate. You should check yours regularly, at least every 3 months. Install carbon monoxide detectors in your home too, especially in the sleeping areas and near combustion equipment.

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SIX STEPS TO SUCCESS!

Which siding is best? Which roofing? What about the windows? Which appliances? What should I choose? How can I make the best choice?

We often hear these questions from clients, and with good reason. Choosing building materials, whether for repairs, renovations or new construction, is tough. There are many, many choices. What's right for you?

Every year, the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) stages the world's largest show for the home building industry, the International Builders Show (www.buildersshow.com). More than 100,000 people attend. In 1.5 million square feet of exhibition space (that's more than 30 acres!), several hundred exhibitors try to convince you that their product is the best. What you learn, more than anything else, is that there are many satisfactory choices for most major building components, materials and appliances; there is no one right choice, and is that the only consideration?

Choosing the right person to install the product is often more important than choosing the right brand or product. Most of the problems Criterium engineers are asked to investigate in homes are the result of poor workmanship or lack of understanding regarding product installation, not the performance of the component itself.

How do you choose? Here is a six-step process to optimize your results.

*For reference, in the discussion that follows, we have used the term **builder** to apply to the person, persons or company that will complete the work for you. Some might use the term **contractor** or **general contractor (GC)**. These are interchangeable. The builder, in turn, may use trade contractors or subcontractors (again, interchangeable terms) to perform certain functions on your project.*

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STEP ONE – CATEGORY

	Passive	Active
Unit Installation	Passive/Unit	Active/Unit
Incremental Installation	Passive/Incremental	Active/Incremental

What category does the component or product fall into?

- Is it an active or passive component? Faucets, appliances, garage door openers and light switches are examples of active components, that is, things that need to function regularly, reliably and for a reasonable length of time. Siding, roofing, piping and framing are examples of passive components, that is, things that perform their intended function continuously, without any movement or manual operation.
- How is the component installed – as a unit or incrementally? A stove, air conditioner or shower stall is installed as a unit. Siding, bricks and shingle roofing are installed incrementally, piece by piece.
- How easy is it to replace the component? Heating units, water heaters and air conditioners are relative easy to replace, but framing, wiring, plumbing, windows and siding are more difficult to replace.

With those criteria, where does the component fit in the matrix to the left?

This step helps you prioritize the relative importance of product performance and installation workmanship, as shown in the following table.

	Importance of Product Quality	Importance of Workmanship	Examples
Passive/unit	Moderate	Moderate	Gas fireplace, cabinetry
Active/unit	High	Moderate	Faucets, appliances, light switches
Passive/incremental	Moderate to low	High	Siding, roofing, flooring, masonry, drywall
Active/incremental	Moderate	High	Drainage systems, gutters, windows, doors

Note that many PASSIVE products are parts of SYSTEMS. For example, the roof shingles are part of the roof SYSTEM, which includes flashing, underlayment, shingles, drip edges, sheathing and ventilation. Thus, the workmanship (which includes an understanding of the SYSTEM) becomes very important if the SYSTEM is to perform as expected.

STEP TWO – WORKMANSHIP/ WORKER SKILL

When workmanship is of high importance, how do you find the right person? In this category, the person or company that installs what you choose is *more important* than the product itself.

- Meet the people who will do your work.
- Check references for work they have done in the past 3 to 5 years.
- Find out what warranty they provide for their workmanship.
- Explore how receptive they are to input from you.
- Discuss which products they recommend and use regularly.
- Trust your instincts (if you are not comfortable, don't use that person).

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STEP THREE – PRODUCT QUALITY

When product quality is of high importance, what should you do? In this category, choosing the best product will result in the highest degree of satisfaction. But the best product *for you* is not always the best product *universally*. There are many products that are essentially equal in quality.

- Talk to knowledgeable people (suppliers, friends, consultants) in your area about the performance of different brands of the same product. Local experience is important.
- Talk to your contractors about their preferences and experiences with different products. If you have chosen someone you trust, his or her opinion will be an important part of your project.
- Make sure the product you are considering has been used by others in your area for at least 3 to 5 years. Don't let your home be a laboratory for a new unproven product.
- Visit the Web sites for different brands of the same product. Compare performance information.
- Carefully review all the product's warranties from both the manufacturer and the contractor (more about that later).
- For many products (such as appliances), check resources such as *Consumer Reports*.

STEP FOUR – DO YOUR HOME- WORK

Understand the product installation requirements. (Read the instructions!) You should *not assume* that even the most well-intended, well-reputed contractor you have chosen will be familiar with each specific manufacturer's requirements for the installation of all the products and materials to be used.

- Visit the manufacturers' Web sites.
- Review the various types of products available for your application.
- Read the installation instructions in detail, especially noting any limitations with regard to contact with dissimilar materials, exposure to sunlight, types of adhesives not to use, etc.
- Visit our site or related trade association Web sites. We have provided a few at the left. You will find industry standards for installation, universal guidelines and recommendations that should not be compromised.
- Make a list of questions and/or comments, and discuss them with your contractor. That accomplishes two objectives: You will learn more, and the contractor will recognize that you are actively interested in the outcome of the project.

Related Trade Association Web sites:

Roofs:

www.nrca.net
www.roofcoatings.org
www.asphaltroofing.org

Siding:

www.bia.org
www.wrcia.org
www.vinylsiding.org

Windows:

www.wdma.com
www.aamanet.org
www.nfrc.org

Plumbing:

www.pmihome.org

STEP FIVE – WARRANTY COVERAGE

Understand the warranties that are provided. Typically, for any component or product, there will be two – one from the manufacturer for the performance of the product and the other from the contractor for the performance of that product in your home as it relates to the workmanship of installation.

- Most states have a minimum requirement for warranties to be provided by contractors. Check with your Secretary of State to find those minimum requirements.

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STEP SIX – AFFORDABILITY

- Identify the limitations of the manufacturers' warranties. Most warranties provided by roofing manufacturers, for example, apply only to the service life of the roofing material; they do *not* warranty against leakage.
- Clarify the warranty provided by the builder. It should cover the performance of the system provided by the use of a particular product (for example, the roof will not leak for 10 years).

What about your budget? At the outset of this discussion, we noted three things to consider, the last of which was the ease with which a component could be replaced. If your project is over budget after you have navigated the first five steps of this exercise, here are some things to consider.

- Can you reduce the overall scope of your project? If so, adjust the scope without compromising the quality or workmanship of what remains.
- Can you complete your project in phases? Perhaps you can afford to do one part this year and another part next year without incurring multiple mobilization fees from your contractor. Even simple projects can often be done in phases (for example, one section of a roof at a time).
- Can you substitute lower-priced components? This is where the ease of replacement becomes relevant. Closing a budget gap by using lower-priced appliances or by painting walls instead of wallpapering them is worth considering because replacing these components in a few years can be relatively easy. However, compromising the quality of the siding, roofing, windows and doors will save money but will also compromise the overall long-term quality (and therefore value) of the project because replacing these components in a few years will not be practical.

Any project on your home can be both exciting and intimidating. In today's world, you can be overwhelmed with choices. What is important is to set priorities and deliberately move through an objective process to make your choices, keeping in mind that the quality of workmanship (the commitment to quality by your builder and the individuals who will be working on your project) is typically the *most important area* to consider to ensure a satisfactory outcome.

Choose those who will do your work well, and monitor their performance. Be assertive, reasonable and knowledgeable. You will be pleased with the results!

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nearest you, call
1-800-242-1969

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