

Vet, Don't Bet

A recent renovation completed by
Gehman Design Remodeling

Before starting any home project, Dennis D. Gehman of **Gehman Design Remodeling** suggests a homeowner should pose many questions to a potential contractor. **BY LEIGH STUART**

Dennis D. Gehman, Master Certified Remodeler, licensed electrician, registered Master Plumber, and president of Harleysville-based Gehman Design Remodeling, is the first to acknowledge that home improvement contractors don't always have the best reputation. This is why he says it is vital to properly vet any potential contractor to ensure that the business and its team can execute a project with the reliability, respect, and craftsmanship it deserves.

The No. 1 reason he cites: "In Pennsylvania, it's too easy to become a contractor. There is next to nothing in terms of a vetting process. All someone has to do is show they have \$50,000 in liability insurance, and I'm not even sure you can buy a policy that small. You can post that information to the state and go and cancel the next day, never pay, but you'll still be registered for two years. It's that easy, but it's unfortunate."

For most people, a home is the most expensive purchase they'll ever make in their lives. As such, homeowners should have confidence in a contractor's qualifications as a tradesperson but also their reliability, their ability to adapt, and their willingness to address client needs as they arise. Gehman recognizes that home improvement is a very personal service. After all, a client is inviting representatives from the business into their home every day for weeks or even months.

"Proper preparation prevents poor performance," Gehman says. "It's true in many areas of life, and certainly with remodeling projects. As long as a project is going to take, a similar amount of time ought to be spent planning before on-site work begins with the project."

This readiness includes a contractor having

all the proper insurance to ensure that the homeowner isn't liable in the event of an accident. Gehman says many contractors hire subcontractors who do not have workers' compensation insurance, which can be expensive.

Companies who utilize subcontractors often run into scheduling difficulties. Meanwhile, Gehman's team of in-house employees helps to ensure that projects flow seamlessly from one step to the next.

"We'll have the same guys working in a house from start to finish," he says. "We commit to homeowners that we're going to be there each workday, and we assign a project manager who is a tradesman to work on the project with their tools and coordinate with us here in our office."

Even with all the planning possible, life often throws a curveball or two. A capable contractor will be able to pivot and adjust.

"We try to make everything go as smoothly as possible, but when it doesn't, we respond with empathy and a plan to get things back on track," he says. "That confirms with the client that they made the right choice. We tell people, 'We can't control what the industry does; we can only do things the right way for ourselves and our clients.'" ■

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QUESTIONS FOR A POTENTIAL CONTRACTOR

"You don't have to ask every question on this list, but ask enough that you feel comfortable," Gehman advises. "If a contractor doesn't do a good job of answering your questions or beats around the bush, to me that's a red flag."

- How long have you been in business?
- May we talk with some of your clients?
- Are you registered with the state of Pennsylvania?
- Would you send me an insurance certificate?
- What are your qualifications for design-build remodeling?
- Can you describe your design-build process?
- Who owns the business? Is this person involved in day-to-day operations?
- Are plans/project designs done in-house by staff or with sub-contractors?
- Will you help/direct us in selecting the right materials for our project?
- Who provides the materials for the project?
- Who will be our main point of contact during design and construction?
- Do you have a showroom?
- Is trade labor done in-house with staff or with subcontractors?
- Will someone be working on our project every workday until the project is finished?
- What days/hours do you work on projects?
- Who takes care of obtaining the required permits and coordinating inspections?
- What is your backlog, or when can you start new projects?
- Have you won any industry awards?