



What I Look For In Kitchen & Bath Subs

by Lynn Comeskey

Finding good subcontractors for kitchen and bath remodeling is one of the most difficult tasks I face. Kitchens and baths are packed with systems, fixtures, and appliances, and these rooms are scrutinized by clients more closely than others in the house.

Good subs are even harder to find than good employees. The main reason is employees don't have to run a business. We know a number of subs who do beautiful work, but they don't know how to run a business. And that hurts their work as much as if they were incompetent at their trade.

One Is Enough

My philosophy is to locate a good sub and work with them exclusively; my tile setter has been with me for over 10 years. I couldn't and wouldn't ask the sub who I only used when he was the lowest bidder to do the things I ask my regular subs to do. It may cost more to do business this way, but the level of service is much higher.

For example, if there is a problem with the vinyl put down on the kitchen floor, our sub fixes it rather than waiting weeks for the manufacturer's rep to show up and argue about where the fault lies. More than anything else, these guys must realize that remodeling is a service industry. There are enough unavoidable delays in the business already. The longer it takes to complete the job, the more it costs me in client dissatisfaction. And, even though there might not be a tradesperson working on site on a particular day, it doesn't mean I'm not racking up overhead expenses.

The Right Stuff

Although most of us are looking for the perfect sub, we'll settle for quite a bit less. Here's a list of the qualities I look for in order of their importance:

Technically competent. Most of my jobs are high-end, and my clients demand top-notch work. That work also needs to be consistent, so I can trust it.

In some of the trades such as plumbing and electrical, it's fairly easy to judge. But in a trade like tile setting, you get into subjective areas: Is this the best layout for tile of this size on this countertop? Will the grout still look good 5 years from now?

I have become a better judge of who is "good" with experience. For example, my hardwood flooring contractor is expensive. Although he does nice work, he is not the absolute best. However, he has been in the business for years. He has seen most problems before, and has an esoteric tool or technique that can fix it without ripping out the first attempt. Having him available to solve problems is well worth the trade off.

Caring. We can usually find competent people, but if they don't go the extra step, it doesn't work for me. I want my sub to take care of things that need fixing. For instance, if my plumbing sub sees copper attached directly to galvanized, I want him to replace it with a dielectric union without even asking.

Reliable. I've got to be able to count on these guys to turn in a bid, show up on time, and finish when they say they will. You can't maintain a schedule if your subs don't.

A cabinetmaker I really enjoy working with because of the quality of his product and his sense of humor, routinely gives me bids late or not at all. I now only ask him to bid when his work is specified.

Clean and neat. If you're going to succeed in the kitchen and bath remodeling business, you'd better be clean, neat, and careful. You can't have a glazier who routinely scratches the tub or the ceiling when installing full-height doors. Nor should there be

metal filings on the floor when he leaves.

These guys should also look professional and consider the impact they are having on the customer. For instance, most of my customers don't smoke, I don't smoke, I look for employees who don't smoke, and I apply the same yardstick to subs.

Available. Accessibility and availability are the next most important criteria. I stopped dealing with one painter because he never returned my calls — even to get a bid. Given a choice, I prefer to deal with a sub big enough to have an office with a secretary who can relay a message during the day to someone who can make a decision.

Another advantage of dealing with a larger company is that they are better able to get someone to the job when we need them because they run more crews. We are willing to trade the choice of which tradesman actually does the job for this flexibility. This sometimes means the quality varies. But if you have a sub that stands behind his work — and you're one of his larger accounts — he'll come in and make any necessary corrections.

Good client skills. Next, we come to the "gorilla factor." We want our employees and our sub's employees to be pleasant and courteous. Although they don't work directly for the client, about 50% of our work — one-half the impression the client is left with — is subbed out.

The level of client skills also varies between trades. One of my cleverer employees has developed a rating scale he calls the "subcontractor food chain." The idea is that some trades typically deal with customers well, while others do not. We have to be very careful with the latter group.

Interested in the long term. I want to work with a sub that wants to form a relationship. This means there will be give and take. If my sub clearly makes a mistake, I expect him

to cover it. Usually, the fault is not clear, and we agree to split the cost.

Priced right. I purposely placed price last. I do have a price pain threshold, but it is relatively high. If someone is above the threshold, I let them know. Below the threshold, I rely on the traits I mentioned above.

In-House Trades

Despite these standards, subs are the part of the business we have the least control over. When we survey our clients after completing a job, the subs always get the lowest rating.

Part of the reason is an aversion to the chaos created by the dirtier trades. Perhaps, we need to do a better job of preparing our clients. But it's also that our subs just aren't as careful on the job site as our employees. The drywall sub who spends most of his day on tenant improvements isn't going to have the same attitude as one of my carpenters who has been "living" in the client's house for six weeks.

My solution has been to increase the work my employees do. Now we do all of our own electrical, plumbing and tile work. This way, we have control over the hiring and the work. We are substituting our management skills for those of the subs.

Currently, we are keeping a plumber and an electrician with one apprentice each, and a tile setter busy full time. Our quality is definitely up, and our costs are in line with what our subs used to charge. The price we pay is in scheduling; sometimes, the tail is wagging the dog. Although we don't have to worry about calling a sub's office and changing dates and times, we do have to arrange our jobs carefully so we don't end up needing three plumbing crews at the same time. ■

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