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THE GUIDE

How to stop your builder from hating you

Pay on time, make yourself scarce, be decisive and don't forget the tea

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Many homeowners are guilty of paying builders in cash, because it is easy and avoids the 20 per cent VAT

Almost half of British homeowners are planning on undertaking home improvement but are struggling to find a decent builder, according to a survey.

If you do manage to find someone reputable, reliable and trustworthy, it's in your best interests to keep them happy. Alex Depledge, the chief executive of Resi, an architectural firm, that partnered with the Homeowners Alliance (HOA) to conduct the survey, says that "people have to undergo a huge amount of education about what they need to do".

So what's the secret to cultivating a successful relationship? Here are seven tips for staying on their good side.

Don't mess about over money

A refusal to be upfront about payment, or avoiding it, is the No 1 bugbear for builders. According to the HOA, a third of UK homeowners (5.3 million) admit to having paid tradesmen in cash, ostensibly to save costs by avoiding VAT (an extra 20 per cent on building work), but also because handing over a wodge of notes is often the easiest thing to do. "This black market makes homeowners vulnerable," Depledge says. "There is no recourse when something goes wrong if you've paid in cash."

It also makes builders vulnerable, because for every cowboy builder there's a cowboy client who defaults. Don't be that client. Arrange proper payments, releasing a set amount as each element of the job is completed. Use a contract to set out mutually agreed terms — the Federation of Master Builders (FMB) offers one to its members, or try the [Joint Contracts Tribunal](#), which produces documents for domestic use.

Don't hover in the background

Granted, it's your home and your money, and you have a right to ensure that a job is being carried out to your expectations. However, it's a fine line between taking an interest and hypervigilance.

Monitoring every brick being laid and timing every tea break shows a lack of confidence. It's probably best to keep your opinions on the correct mixing ratio of sand to cement to yourself.

"It's really annoying when clients try to instruct your site staff on the best way to complete complex building works after reading a couple of online articles," says Kunle Barker, a TV presenter and property expert.

Don't disappear for too long

Going on an extended holiday while work on big projects, which involve the loss of cooking facilities and/or water, is often recommended, especially if you have young children.

However, being incommunicado is not ideal, and neither is liaising by terse text message. Regular site meetings at an allotted weekly time are vital. "Make yourself available during daylight hours," says Ian Henderson of Hende Building Services. "It's impossible to take a proper look at a project in the dark."

Don't ask for added extras

Despite the stereotype that builders are raking it in, most small to medium-sized companies operate on very tight profit margins. This means that at busy times their schedules are timed to the hour. Don't ask for extras such as garden walls being built or steps being moved

without offering to pay for them. Brian Berry, the chief executive of the FMB, suggests keeping some money aside to cover unplanned elements. Builders also have to take into account unpredictable weather.

“Clients have to understand that in wet or cold weather there are certain things we can’t do, such as laying concrete, or anything mortar-based,” Henderson says. “On a bad weather day we may go and work on an indoor job. I’d ask for flexibility on this.”

Don’t change your mind

One Yorkshire builder recalls a basement conversion for which his three-person team spent two days cutting out and constructing a complex stairwell, only for the client to decide that he wanted it moved to the opposite side of the room.

“One of the biggest sources of client-builder disputes are changes to the project after work has started,” Berry says. “Changes can cause delays or have an impact on the work schedule, and this will clearly cost money, so it’s best to be as clear as you can from the start. If any changes have to be made, confirm them in writing, and understand the impact on costs and timings to your builder.”

Do co-operate

A good builder will be on site by 8am. Your idea of an early start may differ, but they can only work until 6pm, Monday to Friday, under the Control of Pollution Act 1974. If you don’t like these rules, tough. Of course, if you put the effort into developing a good working relationship, things needn’t be so harsh. You can negotiate, but this requires trust, so be civilised. Ensure that the hire of toilet facilities are included in the costs, or offer the use of one of your own. Likewise parking and skip permits. Make space for storage of materials on site, and sort out sensible security and access.

You can’t choose the station, but you can agree a tolerable volume for the site radio. Offer water and a kettle. Kevin McCabe, a builder from Devon whose cob-built house appeared on *Grand Designs*, says that his pet peeve is too few cups of tea. “Being looked after really helps builders to feel appreciated on site, which, in turn, always helps the job to go smoothly,” he says.

Don’t ignore the rules

In their haste to get a job done, many homeowners are guilty of avoiding “petty” issues such as organising and paying for building-regulation inspections. These are the legal standards that must be met to ensure that a home is safe and comfortable, and cover elements such as means of escape from fire (essential with a loft conversion). A builder or architect will usually book the inspection, but it’s a homeowner’s responsibility to meet the cost. “Building regs became a basic necessity after [the Great Fire of London, which started at a bakers in] Pudding Lane in 1666,” says Jeremy Wiggins of Gpad London, an architect and interior design company. “They try to ensure that the house you live in is the best version it can be.”