

CHANGE AT WORK

THIS TEN-YEAR REMODELING VETERAN DESCRIBES A POST-SANDY ISLAND ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH OWNER HOMEWORK IS MORE CRITICAL THAN EVER

BY SUSAN LUNNY KEAG • PHOTO THIS PAGE BY LUCA SFORZA



In today's information age, people looking to make just about any kind of purchase will often spend hours online researching the best quality product for the most affordable price. However, when it comes to doing work on their home, many rush to make a quick decision without having done proper homework.

"It astounds me how quickly people make decisions," said Clifford Siegel, president of CEE-JAY Real Estate Development Corp., based in Huguenot.

"People do hours and hours of research before they buy a new television or car, yet they'll hire a contractor for a \$20,000 job or even a \$200,000 job in a matter of hours."

Siegel began by saying that potential clients should look for a contractor who is licensed, insured, and qualified to ensure that the project will not only get finished, but feature the desired results. For its part, his company specializes in taking the guesswork out of the contracting process, and tackles projects from roof raises and kitchen and bathroom remodeling to custom homes and commercial projects.

A common complaint Siegel hears when talking to customers or clients is just how difficult it is to get an honest answer about any kind of home improvement job from someone "who's honest, ethical, shows up to work every day and doesn't mislead them or misguide them," as he put it.

Many homeowners are lured by companies who offer to get the job done quickly and/or for a remarkably low price.

"They are enticed and blown away by attractive pricing... but the contractor will never bring the job to the finish line," Siegel explained. In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, these bargain price predators are in even greater supply, adding an extra layer of research urgency.

"I just think, especially now in a post-Sandy environment, the public in general needs to be more informed, more knowledgeable, and better armed with as much credible information as possible," the former board member of the Building Industry Association of New York City added. "There's too much misinformation going around that is misleading homeowners to go down paths that ultimately may not be in their long-term best interest."

Siegel, who is also vice president of the Staten Island Home Improvement Contractors Association, a National Association of Home Builders certified graduate builder, a certified graduate remodeler, as well as a certified green professional, added that anyone looking to do renovations or home improvements should make sure the person they hire has references, including past customers whom they can either contact or drive by to see the job that was done. "Get their feedback," as he advises.

The contractor prides himself and his business in giving the customer an honest answer about work they are looking to get done, and has turned down many jobs in the process.

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"I often advise that a certain job will just not be money well spent on a home...that owners would not recoup the cost of work in the resale value of the home," he said.

A former options trader on the floor of the American Stock Exchange, Siegel started out buying homes and flipping them for a profit, a process which nearly always involves renovation. People saw his work and had a positive response.

"They were thrilled with the quality and specialty of my work and asked if I could do some for them as well," he recalled. More than a decade later, CEE-JAY Real Estate Development Corporation is still going strong.

"The hardest part for me is finding enough time in the day to meet customer demand; we get between 10 to 15 calls a day to come out and give estimates and bid on jobs, which equates to about 75-100 estimates each week."

Regardless of how busy he gets, Siegel added that he will always make time to listen to customers.

"We have a strong willingness to listen to our clients and do what makes them happy," he said, smiling. "Not just do what we want because it's easier or potentially more profitable." •



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