

10 Questions to Ask Before Choosing a Heating and Air Conditioning Company **by: Ruth King, Nationally Recognized HVAC Industry Consultant**

On the hottest or coldest day of the year your air conditioning or heating system quits. Or, you sense that something just isn't right with your air conditioning or heating system. You've got to find a reputable company. But, who can you trust?

Having worked with many heating and air conditioning (HVAC) companies for over 28 years, I have seen the good companies who take care of their customers and the ones who don't.

The questions I get asked all the time by homeowners include: Where do I go to find a reputable HVAC company? How do I know that the prices I am being quoted will be the price that I actually pay? How can I find a company I can trust?

The answers to these questions are below. I hope these answer help you find a reputable HVAC company.

1. Where do I find a company I can trust?

The first place to start is with friends and family. Ask them who they have used in the past for their heating and air conditioning needs. Were they happy? Did they feel that they were charged a fair price? Would they use that company again?

You also might see HVAC trucks in your neighborhood. Ask your neighbor about her experience.

Look at the trucks. Are they clean? Are they dented with a stick on label with the company's name? And, in many states, the contractor license number is required on the truck. Is it there?

2. If I have to do a web search, what should I look for?

Start with "heating/cooling/air conditioning service or HVAC service, NAME OF TOWN you live in". If you live in a larger city such as New York or Atlanta, narrow the geography down to the county or even the subdivision. For example, "heating service Norcross, Georgia or "air conditioning service Norcross Georgia" or "cooling service Norcross, Georgia." (Norcross is a suburb of Atlanta)

A company's website can tell you a lot about that company. Is there a physical address? Are there pictures of employees? Are there testimonials from satisfied customers?

Of course, an unsatisfied customer would never give a positive testimonial. However, you might know someone who gave a testimonial and call that person.

Also check to see the company's rating with The Better Business Bureau and review sites such as Angie's List. Don't worry if a contractor is not listed with Angie's list. Many reputable contractors choose not to participate in this list.

Once you find a company that you are interested in, search on that company's name. You should find the good and the bad about that company. And, you might have to search page 2, 3, or deeper into the web search.

3. What does the person sound like who answers the telephone?

You've found a company you are interested in...you call. What does the person sound like on the other end of the telephone? Can you understand her name and the name of the company when that person answers or is it rushed and garbled? Is she pleasant? Does she seem concerned about you? Answer your questions? Are they trying to sell you something even before someone comes to your home?

If you don't get a good feeling about this person and the company then call another contractor.

4. What type of warranties are offered on repairs and system replacements?

Most reputable companies warranty their repairs and replacements for a year or longer. The only exception to this is generally leak searches and leak repairs. If there is refrigerant leaking out of your system, it probably should be replaced. HVAC systems are closed systems that should not leak. In my experience, once a leak is fixed on an older system, another one will usually pop up in a different location because the system has operated past its useful life.

Many times you can invest in an extended warranty of 5 to 10 years when replacing a system. Get clear on whether it is a parts warranty or a parts and labor warranty. These warranties require that you maintain your HVAC system each year to keep the warranty in effect. Most reputable contractors offer maintenance plans to satisfy these warranty requirements.

5. Why is a low cost price generally not the best way to go?

All companies in a geographic area have about the same labor and truck costs. If a company "low balls" a price to get in the door, they will probably add on extras and find repairs that may not be needed to bring the price up to what they should be charging in the first place.

Generally with these add-ons, these companies will have the same charges as initially seemingly higher priced companies.

You get what you pay for. If it seems too good to be true, it probably is. I've know many people to call a company for a \$29 special or a ridiculously low replacement price only to spend hundreds of dollars more which may or may not have been warranted.

If a technician tells you that your compressor is grounded or that your heat exchanger is cracked, you might want to get a second opinion. Most reputable companies will be happy to give a second opinion.

6. What type of response time can I expect?

Reputable companies have 24 hour on-call service so that even if you have a problem at 3 AM it can be resolved quickly. If you call during the day before a certain time, you might get the problem resolved that day without overtime charges.

7. What about maintenance agreements? Are they worth it?

Yes - As long as the company you choose performs the HVAC systems manufacturer recommended maintenance procedures. They will save you money on your utility bills and increase the life of your HVAC system. You might get other benefits such as discounted repair prices, no overtime charges, or priority service.

The company you choose should give you a written condition report showing what was done during the maintenance.

It has been my experience that customers who have properly executed maintenance plans on their HVAC systems spend less on repairs and have longer lasting systems because the equipment is operating in the best possible condition for its age.

8. Is the company licensed and insured?

Most states require contractors to be licensed to take care of your heating and air conditioning needs. In addition, the company should carry workman's compensation insurance and general liability insurance to cover any unlikely issues where a technician damaged your home or got hurt.

9. Are the technicians NATE (North American Technician Excellence) certified?

NATE certification requires passing a rigorous test and continuous training. NATE certification means that you know your technician has a competent skill level.

10. What should you expect when a company representative arrives at your home?

- Professionalism. The service technician or home comfort specialist should arrive on time, should look professional, and be courteous.
- If a technician is coming to repair your system, you should expect a complete diagnostic, or check up, of your system.
- If a home comfort specialist is coming to your home to give you an estimate for a new system, you should expect a survey of your home's heating or air conditioning system.
- You should expect the professionals who come to your home to ask about problems you are experiencing with your equipment as well as family health issues like asthma or allergies.
- You should expect a clear, written presentation of the solutions. Our job is to educate you so that you can make informed decisions.
- You should expect to hear about the products that can help you save money, be more comfortable in your home, and extend the life of your heating and air conditioning system.

Hopefully these questions and answers will help you find the right HVAC contractor who can help you stay comfortable in your home for years to come.

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