

# Shop around for a builder, not just a house

By Loren K. Swanson  
special writer

When you are ready to begin shopping for your new house, you should begin shopping for your builder, too. Whether you are buying a condominium, townhouse, in a subdivision or a custom-built house, the quality of your house will be determined by the quality of the builder.

Start your builder-search process by calling your local house builders association. It can give you the names of reputable builders in your area.

The real estate section of your local newspaper is also a good source. Ask friends and relatives about builders they have dealt with directly, or ask them for the names of acquaintances who have recently dealt with a builder.

Once you have developed a list of

builders, find out about their reputations and the quality of their work. The best way is to visit houses they have built and talk to the owners.

Ask the builders on your list for addresses of their recently completed houses, subdivisions, townhouses or condominium complexes. At the very least, drive by and see if the houses are visually appealing.

Look at houses that are the same style as you plan to buy. A good time to visit is on a weekend morning when people are outside doing chores or errands. Just introduce yourself and explain that you are considering buying a house from the same builder who built theirs.

**QUESTION THEIR** satisfaction with the house and ask if the builder delivered what was promised in a timely manner. People will generally tell you if they are happy.

When examining a house, look at the quality of the construction features: cabinetry, carpeting, trim work and paint.

In viewing each builder's houses, you must determine whether they lend themselves to the type of lifestyle you want to lead. Look at the amount of interior living space and how efficiently the space is used. Find out if the builder is using modern energy efficiency features, both in appliances and insulation.

A house is primarily a place to live, but it is also an important investment. Consider the appreciation potential of any house you may buy. Be concerned with the value you are getting for your money regarding lo-

cation, housing supply and demand and other local market factors.

One of the most important criteria for selecting a builder is the warranty protection provided on the house. Ask for a copy of the builder's warranty. Read the document thoroughly and be sure you understand what protection would be provided to you. If you have any questions about the coverage, be sure to clarify it with the builder before buying.

Almost all builders offer some form of written warranty. Many builders back their own warranties on workmanship and materials, typically for one year. Other builders offer warranties backed by an insurance company.

To get an insured warranty, you must buy a house from a builder who belongs to a warranty program.

**WHILE YOU ARE** shopping for your builder, find out from each one you interview what you can expect regarding service after the sale. Typically a builder will make two service calls during the first year after you move in. These calls are to make repairs on non-emergency problems covered by your warranty.

The first call is usually 30 to 120

days after you move in, and the second is around the 11th month, right before any one-year warranties on workmanship and materials would expire. For emergencies, the builder should send someone right away. When selecting a builder, be thorough and ask a lot of questions. Get as many specifics as possible. If you receive the answers verbally, take notes.

Loren K. Swanson is the past president of the Michigan Association of Home Builders, based in Lansing.



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