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When choosing a timber-frame company, don't just look at pictures of its work. Visit actual homes.



HAMIL CREEK TIMBERWRIGHTS

Getting Answers

How to evaluate and select a timber-frame company

By Anthony F. Zaya

So, you want to build a house. And you've discovered the wide world of timber framing and want to incorporate it into your dream house. But you want to do it for the lowest - absolute lowest - amount of money possible. Here's how to do it: Don't hire an architect or house designer. Sketch the floor plans on 8x10 paper (or better still, use your computer). Have only four corners on your floor plans; put little black squares in those four corners and some more along the walls. These squares will signify posts. Now fax the drawings to 100 or so timber frame companies. Include an obvious form letter that informs the recipient that you have sent out 100 bid requests and that you'd like the bid returned ASAP.

Of the several companies that do respond, you, of course, will want the lowest bidder. So what if that company doesn't waste overhead on insurance, professional conferences, tool sharpening and maintenance or dedicated, seasoned artisans. If they can promise you the world, sign up immediately. You can

now rejoice in your good fortune while they order your pallet grade timbers from Amos and his travelling saw mill show. There you go, timber frames sold by the pound (or sq. foot or board foot) brought to you by the lowest bidder. Whatever your expectations are, lower them.

If the above approach has the ring of familiarity it is because it is similar in attitude to those "Starving Artist Sales" that are held periodically at places like Holiday Inn. At such sales you can purchase works of art by the square inch. Such pieces have a shelf life of a few years and are fairly uninspired exercises by production line painters.

As in any field of human endeavor there are varying levels of proficiency. And while there are many good companies out there, some are very, very good at what they do; others are less accomplished. Those who are incompetent don't last long, but new incompetent ones do sprout up now and again.

One of the things about a timber framed home is

this: the longer you live in one, the clearer you see the details. That is where excellence shines.

If you understand and appreciate just how fortunate you are to be able to create your own domestic environment, if you approach that mission with joyful seriousness and if you understand that in this world you get pretty much what you pay for only by practicing due diligence, then you realize that you should take a more sensible approach to selecting a timber-frame company. Here's a four-step approach that works for right-brainers, left-brainers and those with well-balanced craniums.

Step 1: Contact

Pick 10 to 12 companies whose ads, promotional materials and website grab you at some level. Write to them and request information. Sort through the materials that come from those companies that do respond, and choose three or four that appeal to you for various reasons. Call each of them to establish personal contact.

Step 2: Evaluation

- Is your call responded to quickly?
- Does the person who answers listen to you, or does she plow ahead, ignoring your questions?
- Does he answer questions clearly?
- Do her questions and input indicate concern and focus?
- Do you begin to feel comfortable speaking with this person?

If so, then ask: How many years has the company been timber framing? How many frames has it constructed? What size, range and variety of projects has it done? Is it strictly regional, or has it constructed home in other states and if so, where?

Ideally, the company's principals have degrees in math, engineering,

industrial arts or architecture, a sprinkling of art training and a keen ability to keep the business on a firm foundation. Probe for useful insights.

Also ask: What do these people like most about the discipline of timber framing? Why did they choose to enter the field? Are they members of the Timber Framers' Guild; if so, for how long?

What about services? Does the company offer in-house architectural services? Will it send someone to visit your site? Does it offer an engineer's seal on its timber-frame designs? Does it produce kits, or is all its work custom built? Will it contract to design your house or frame it so that you can put it out on bid?

What species of timbers does the company use? What grade? Does it erect its own frames? Does it offer

panel installation? Will it work with your architect or general contractor?

What about the company's passion for its work, especially your project? Determining this is a bit more subjective, but you'll remember that I promised both right-brain and left-brain activity. Be attentive to the softer, more intuitive side of this whole equation. Ask yourself: Are the people you're dealing with enthusiastic without being overbearing or pushy? Do they genuinely seem to love what they're doing, or are they just putting in the required hours to earn a paycheck?

Always see examples of the work of any timber-frame company you are considering to build your home. Pay attention to such details as the frame joinery. Ask what wood species it uses for its timbers and whether it erects its own frames.



Step 3: Verification

Get references. Three or four names don't cut it. The longer the company you're considering has been in business, the more names and phone numbers it should freely offer you. If you're feeling really bold, ask for a more random sampling: clients whose names begin with certain letters.

Ask for the names and numbers of architects and general contractors with whom each company you're considering has worked. Unlike homeowners, who respond rather subjectively to their experience, these professionals usually offer a more objective evaluation. The lists provided should be unedited.

Having gotten their names, make sure you call the architects and general contractors. Ask: What do you like or dislike about working with this company? Did it meet its commitments? Would you work with it again?

Those who pass muster thus far, you should consider visiting. Remember that you have to live with the results of your choice, so even a long trip is worth the effort.

Seek assurances. Does the company guarantee its work? Will it state so on a contract?

The issue of a company's solvency is a weighty one. Don't be coy about asking for the name of a contact at a company's bank. Be sure to have the company's account number. Also, ask for its Dunn & Bradstreet number and the phone number of the local Better Business Bureau. If you experience or sense any hesitation, a bright red flag should move right up the pole.

Finally, check with suppliers. They can be a ready source of insight into a business. If they're supportive, that's a good sign. If not, ask why.

Probe for answers. After all, you'll be asked to put down a sub-

stantial chunk of money long before the first truck arrives at your site. Do your best to be sure the company you're dealing with will be in business well into the future.

Step 4: Culmination

Take time to visit the company's plant. Regardless of the size or sophistication, you can see and learn plenty. Is there rhythm and order or chaos? Are the tools in good order? Does it look professional? Would you like to work here? Is there a general sense of respect among managers and employees? Are photos of past work displayed?

Visit projects, too. Ask the company to arrange a tour of some frames that it has constructed nearby—some older, some newer. (Don't put too much faith in photographs; you want to see the real thing.) Look at the whole package, but don't ignore the details. For instance, are the joints tight and well crafted? Details speak more clearly than any 12-page color brochure.

Step 5: Decision

Now you can pull all your findings together and choose the timber-frame company. It's all up to you, but at least now it's an informed decision.

There are many, many solid, dedicated timber framers out there. It will not be difficult to select the one that's best for you. If you can narrow the list down to two, have them bid on your plans. If you have no frame plans, hire one of them to design the frame, then have both bid on it. Or you may feel so good about one company that you want to deal only with it. This situation is more the norm than the exception.

Finally, listen to that little voice inside you. It is seldom wrong—especially if you've done your homework. **THI**

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