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an excerpt from **Let the Buyer (Still) Beware**

By **JULIE SCELFO**

AT a time when “consumers are the ones in the driver’s seat,” in the words of David Crowe, a longtime economist for the National Association of Home Builders, they have the luxury of being more careful and discriminating in hiring a contractor than they might have been when demand exceeded supply. In fact, now that it’s the other way around, it may be more important than ever to follow some common-sense guidelines.

**RESEARCH** With many builders who used to specialize in new construction turning to contracting work, there is a glut of contractors out there. Before even thinking about estimates, look for contractors who are not only licensed and bonded, but have experience in the specific kinds of work you need done.

Will the contractor handle cleanup? What about hauling away debris? Will you still be able to use the bathroom or the kitchen?

**CHECK REFERRALS** If a company doesn’t offer a client it is currently working with, that’s a “big red flag,” said Bob Peterson, a contractor in Fort Collins, Colo. “All of us have less clients than we’ve had in the past because of the economy, but if they don’t have any current clients, there’s a reason.”

**BE FLEXIBLE...** Don’t expect something for nothing. Now that many highly qualified contractors are more open to small projects than they once were, it may make sense for you to be as well. If you can’t afford the new bathroom of your dreams — or just don’t want to spend what it would cost — ask what can be done with what you’re able or willing to spend.

**DISCUSS** Before signing the contract, review it one more time to make sure a detailed plan is in place for how exactly the project will unfold. Planning, pricing and scheduling are as important as actual construction, Mr. Peterson said, and failing to plan properly makes everything take longer — and cost more. Consider questions like: What time will the workers arrive? Where will supplies be stored? And, of course, When will it be done?