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Finding a professional who is truly 'green'

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Green building" and "sustainability" have become huge buzzwords.

In the past several years, a growing demand for building projects that use environmentally friendly and energy-efficient materials has spurred a burgeoning green movement in the construction industry.

The terms "green" and "sustainable" tend to be used interchangeably. But it's important to know there are differences between them.

Green building is simply the practice of increasing the efficiency with which buildings use resources -- such as energy, water and materials -- while reducing impacts on human health and the environment, through better siting, design, construction, operation, maintenance and removal.

Sustainability or sustainable design is the related practice of creating healthier and more resource efficient models of construction, renovation, operation, maintenance and demolition.

How can you determine whether your contractor/developer/builder is qualified to discuss, plan and build a building that is certified green and/or is built in a sustainable manner?

There's no prohibition against a building professional describing themselves as "green" or as a builder who uses sustainable practices and materials. The onus thus is on the consumer to determine the company or professional they're contracting with has a proven track record. Distinguishing between the terms should give you a better eye for the truly environmentally attuned service provider and equip you to ask the right questions.

From this point, we'll lump the terms "green" and "sustainable" under the one term, "green."

- LEED certification -- An independent entity certifies that a building has met green standards. There are several green building certifications that are recognized.

Foremost among these is "LEED" -- Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design. LEED certification is offered by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), which has established a list of standards for new construction of all types.

Previously there was no measurable benchmark for green building, but LEED changed that, creating a national standard for green buildings.

- LEED Accredited Professional (LEED AP) -- Buyers are demanding greener buildings, and have demonstrated a willingness to pay extra for higher green standards. Developers and sellers are spending time on and paying attention to the marketing of those green features, knowing buyers will be paying close attention.

There has been large growth in the number of professionals getting certified as LEED AP, which comes from an accreditation program run by the Green Building Certification Institute (GBCI; see **www.gbci.com**). Many professionals associated with the building industry are able to attain LEED AP certification, specific to their area of expertise, such as architects, building engineers of all types, builders, general contractors, subcontractors, furniture specialists, developers and many others.

- How to find a green professional -- LEED AP certification means your professional has "demonstrated a thorough understanding of green building practices and principles and familiarity with LEED requirements, resources and processes." In addition, a LEED-certified professional can suggest ways to earn LEED credits without extra cost, identify means of offsetting certain expenses with savings in other areas and spot opportunities for synergies in your project.

You can find LEED-accredited professionals at **www.gbci.org**, clicking on "accredited professionals."

Other ways to make sure the company or individual you're hiring follows green practices:

- Educate yourself on green building first -- This includes touring green buildings and attending green building conferences and workshops. That way, you'll be able to knowledgeably engage potential contractors in discussions about their interest in and experiences with green building, areas of expertise and their particular interest in your job.
- Check if the company has experience in green projects -- You must ensure your potential partner isn't just following this new trend, as so many firms are. The company's project list should indicate whether it's committed to the environment, sustainable development and success.
- Seek letters of recommendation, sit-down time with past clients, and a look at work from recent jobs and past projects to determine professional continuity.
- How connected to the industry is the company? A credible company often will collect and analyze data from green projects around the world, giving you access to the most current thinking.
- Ask if the company doesn't just build green, but also runs a green business operation. Determine if it's experienced in the specific work you need completed.
- Make sure the company will work with you to develop a sustainable program -- including costs, schedules, best management practices required and anticipated results -- that describes its intended goals.
- Check whether the company evaluates the entire project for impact, from culture change to building operating efficiency.
- Make sure the company has the wherewithal and experience needed to manage the individual components, contractors and vendors required to complete the work.

- The contractor should be able to explain to you more than just the green approach, but also the benefits to you and your building in terms of lower utility bills, better air quality and more durable, sustainable materials.
- Find out about potential contractors' partners and subcontractors, and what their affiliates (competitors, suppliers, subcontractors, building inspectors, real estate agents, etc.) have to say about them.
- Network -- Ask family members, friends, co-workers and others you trust, who've recently been satisfied by completed work, for referrals to licensed professionals and companies working green.

John Robbins, co-founder and managing partner of the Engineered Interiors Group, can be reached at jrobbins@pearcom.com.