

June 1st, 2012

“Q: Dear Kitchen Guy: We are looking to remodel our home over the next 12 to 18 months. We would like to be eco-friendly but we are not sure where to start and the big box stores have been no help. What do you suggest?”

A: As always, I recommend a thorough plan and budget before you start shelling out money for projects. Here is the process I suggest you use to remodel your home and make it more green or eco-friendly:

1 – Do a preliminary assessment (See Maintaining Your Home, February 2012) for more details.

2 – Have an Energy Audit done to determine where you are losing energy (dollars) and what needs to be done to tighten up the house. This will cost some money but the investment is well worth it.

3 – Having done steps one and two above, now the fun (?) starts. You will have to determine what has to be done and in what order. The order in which projects get done should be determined by factoring cost, return on investment, availability of funds, existing conditions and a logical sequencing of projects. For instance, you don't want to do a lot of interior painting if the roof is leaking even if you can't afford the roof repair and you can afford a can or two of paint.

At this point you may be wondering why you started this process. *(When you're surrounded by alligators, its hard to keep focused on draining the swamp.)* Oh yeah, you wanted to go green, hence the alligator reference.

4 – Choose your materials, equipment and suppliers. Going green can be very subjective. You must follow your own conscience and trust your instincts. Trust me when I say you will never be green enough for everyone. You will have to find a balance between logical applications, affordability, value and your own sense of style. Here are some examples:

- Is cabinetry made with bamboo grown and harvested overseas, mixed with resins and other chemicals in unregulated factories greener than laminate cabinets that look very similar made locally with materials sourced through eco-friendly or sustainable programs?
- Does it make sense to purchase a high efficiency furnace and air conditioner when it might cost up to 50% more if your house is too drafty for the unit to work properly?

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- Does it make sense to purchase a new counter top made with recycled glass and concrete when it costs more than quartz product made in a modern efficient factory and doesn't hold up to everyday use nearly as well?
- Does it make sense to "re-purpose" an old appliance when a new one so much more efficiently will pay for itself (return on investment) in three years?

When it comes to choosing dealers and contractors, there are several ways in which you can go about finding the right contractor(s) in your area. A great source is NARI – National Association for the Remodeling Industry, another is the BBB – Better Business Bureau. I am personally not a fan of organizations or web sites that basically provide you with referrals from people you or they, for that matter, don't know.

You should be getting my point by now. Research is the key. Find that balance and move forward.

One last thought on the subject:

In my opinion you are correct, "Big Box" stores or large merchandisers that compete with other similar organizations will not go green (other than figurative lip service) because their focus is on bringing products to market at the lowest cost they can, while maintain high profit margins. They do not operate in a vacuum - they are simply doing what their customer base demands of them. If you want more green information and options, support locally based businesses.