

February 13, 2012

***“Q: We just remodeled our kitchen; can you tell us the best way to keep it looking new? We are busy professionals and would also appreciate any advice you could offer regarding home maintenance in general.*”**

A: There are five steps you can take to make keep your kitchen and home in general running smoothly. First organize your information. Second, create a team of qualified people and/or companies to assist you in doing what needs to be done. Third, do a complete and comprehensive assessment of your home; you will probably need professional help for this step. Forth, create a maintenance and repair plan with schedule and expected costs. Fifth, incorporate these items into your household budget.

The goal in this process is to prevent premature equipment failure and give you a clear view of where your money will be best spent moving forward. However, safety must come first; check your smoke and carbon monoxide detectors. If they are not working properly fix or replace them.

### **Step 1:**

The best place to start is the nearest office supply store. You will need binders, paper, pens and pencils and clear plastic binder pockets large enough to hold the specification sheets and manuals that came with your appliances. You should buy enough binders for each area of your home. I suggest you organize them in the following manner:

- A. Kitchen & Bathroom(s)
- B. Mechanical & Safety Equipment – Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Detectors, Furnace, Hot Water Heater, Generator, Sump and Ejector Pumps, etc.
- C. Exterior – Windows, Roof, Gutters & Spouts, Eaves & Fascia, Siding, Bricks etc.
- D. Other Rooms – Bedrooms, Living Rooms Etc.
- E. Tools and Portable Equipment – Lawn mowers, Snow blowers, Generators, Power Tools and anything else that comes with a manual.

In the pocket of these binders you can store the manufacturer’s manuals, receipts from where you bought them and from the people or companies that serviced them. These manuals can be huge time and money savers when things break, need servicing or cleaning. In the manuals you will typically find cleaning instructions and replacement part numbers and telephone numbers to help lines. I often find it easier and less expensive to by parts, for instance, water filters directly from the manufacturer over the telephone or their web site. Manufacturer help lines can also be a great source for factory trained and certified technicians.

Write down your exact model number and serial number on the front of each manual. Many manufacturers publish manuals to cover more than one model number.

If you do not have the manuals, model and serial numbers for your existing equipment it is not difficult to start gathering the information. Manufacturers' plates can usually be found on your equipment with a serial and model numbers easily readable. Then you can usually find a web site where you can download the manuals at no charge. You may also want to write the web address and/or help line number down on the front of the manual as well.

### **Step 2:**

Remember the old saying "When your only tool is a hammer every problem looks like a nail". If you hire a window specialist to help you with your assessment don't be surprised if they determine you need new windows.

Assemble a team of qualified people and/or companies to assist you in doing what needs to be done. I suggest the local NARI (National Association of the Remodeling Industry) office or the BBB (Better Business Bureau). You can also search the yellow pages for a maintenance services company or remodeling contractor. A good remodeling contractor should have working relationships with the various trades and service companies that you will need for step three.

Remember you are not looking for free estimates here. However if you describe what you are trying to do, a professional should be willing to come out and discuss the assessment project (step 3) with you at no charge. Expect to pay the professionals for their time once they start working. This may be the most important project you ever do in your home so take your time and be thorough. Here is what I would do to help make my choice:

- A. Ask for specific experience in doing what you need done.
- B. Ask for a list of the services they perform directly and which ones they sub-contract out.
- C. Ask them specifically what and how they plan to do the job and in what time frame.
- D. Ask for references and check them out.

Here is a tip that will help you maximize your dollars. When the technicians come out to inspect the equipment such as the furnace, have them clean it and tune it up if necessary. They can also help you find the model and serial numbers.

FYI – The NARI Chapter of Greater Chicago publishes a handbook of its current members. Whenever I hand one out, I tell people they should keep it right next to their flashlights and other emergency items.

### **Step 3:**

Do a preliminary assessment of your home. This is where you start gathering the information talked about in step 1. Determine (if you can) when and who serviced the equipment last. Once you've gathered the information and manuals, it's time start doing the complete and comprehensive assessment. This is where the professionals should be brought in.

You will need to find a maintenance company or series of specialty companies to come out and inspect your property. I would start first with an Energy Audit. This will require a professional and should include scanning all exterior walls and ceilings with a Thermal Imaging camera that will give you a clear idea of where you are losing energy. Energy equals dollars. Another key component of an Energy Audit is a Blower Door Test.

A Blower Door Test is done by creating negative pressure in your home with a blower mounted to a door opening. The test will show where outside air is coming into your home and at what rate per hour or day you are exchanging air. You will probably be surprised to find how porous your home is.

Note: It's not uncommon to find out that repairing and caulking your windows and doors may have a better payoff than blowing insulation into your attic and walls.

### **Step 4:**

Create a maintenance and repair plan with schedule and expected costs. Basic items such as batteries for your smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, furnace and water filters should be changed seasonally or according to manufacturers instructions. Then start looking at the bigger ticket items.

Nothing lasts forever but they can last longer if properly maintained. Making your equipment last longer will help free up your dollars for repairs that could save on energy (Energy = Dollars) expenses.

### **Step 5:**

Incorporate these items into your household budget. The budget should be written down and spread out over twelve months and should include everything. Let's face it you have to run your home like a business today. This is what I tell clients planning a new kitchen project.

***\* Remember knowing how much you want to spend is not a budget it is a spending wish. Knowing how you are going to spend that amount on a per item basis is a budget!***