

HOW TO: CHOOSE AN ELECTRICAL CONTRACTOR

Relevant experience, training should light the way

BY DIANA BARR
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Choosing the right electrical contractor can bring peace of mind in terms of both budget and outcome.

Larry Knickman, director of the electrical program for Vatterott College's Sunset Hills campus, said you can start your search by asking for recommendations, based on the size and scope of your project, from the National Electrical Contractors Association or the Independent Electrical Contractors. Both have St. Louis-area chapters.

Look for experience in your type of project, whether it's a low-voltage, fire alarm or computer installation, or wiring a whole building. In addition, "ask if the contractor requires employees to go through an apprenticeship program or an education program," Knickman said.

Look at a potential contractor's list of completed projects and talk with some of their customers, he said. "Ask, did they complete the work in a timely manner? Did they meet the stipulations of the contract?"

Adam Knoebel, vice president of operations for McCarthy Building Cos. Inc., said that with the uncertainties of today's economy, "the financial well-being of the contractor itself is important." McCarthy prequalifies potential contrac-

LARGEST ELECTRICAL CONTRACTORS

Ranked by fiscal 2010 billings

COMPANY	REVENUE
Sachs Electric	\$178.9 million
Guarantee Electrical	\$103 million
J.E. Electric	\$91 million
PayneCrest Electric	\$50 million
Wegman Electric Co.	\$43.2 million

Source: Business Journal research, June 2011

tors. "We ask them to provide some minimum information so that we understand their financial viability," he said, and whether they can be bonded and insured.

Examine the reputation and experience of each contractor as it relates to your type of project. "One contractor may have more experience with labs, for instance," Knoebel said.

McCarthy will take the low bid for some jobs, he said, but if a project is design-assist or design-build, the price is negotiated depending on the work involved. "In that case, relationship plays a part because we know what level of

service we can expect and their design prowess," he said. Also, "there are best-value selections — not just picking a low number, but looking at the expertise they can bring to a particular job."

This fall, Walsh & Associates Inc., a specialty chemical, container and equipment distributor, put a \$500,000, 416-panel solar array on the roof of its 1400 Macklind Ave. warehouse. To make a short list of contractors, "we looked at folks who had done previous solar projects," said Randy Lewis, director of operations.

"Our project was very large scale, so we were looking for safety first," he said. Ask about safety measures and staff training, two attributes he said prompted the company to use IBEW certified electricians on the project.

Even if you like a particular contractor, get bids so you can gauge that costs are where they should be, Lewis said. "Part of the process is just making sure you don't catch anybody speeding," he said, using his euphemism for "overcharging."

Walsh also looked at contractors' energy-efficiency efforts. "We take sustainable practices into our business model and look at suppliers who offer those aspects in their business model," he said. "It doesn't cost any more."

ASK THE EXPERTS



RANDY LEWIS

Director of operations for Walsh & Associates Inc.

- **FIND** relevant experience
- **CONSIDER** safety measures



ADAM KNOEBEL

Vice president of operations for McCarthy Building Cos. Inc.

- **CHECK** financial stability
- **LOOK** for best value



LARRY KNICKMAN

Electrical program director for Vatterott College, Sunset Hills

- **ASK** about employee training
- **TALK** to past clients

Expert IT Solutions

Acumen

ELECTRICAL