



Choosing Your HVAC Contractor: Beyond Yelp and Angie's List

Finding a trained technician and installer who will provide reliable, high-quality service may feel overwhelming, especially if you see online reviews that range from poor to excellent on the very same company. How do you know what or who to believe? We spent some time with long-time heating and cooling contractor Dan Foley to get some perspectives on what to look for when choosing an HVAC contractor.

“The HVAC mechanical system is the backbone of the house,” Dan says. “You can always replace the clothes dryer or dishwasher—but you can’t just swap out the mechanical system. It’s often put off because it’s hidden away, but it’s important. If homeowners spent even a quarter of the time they do picking out flooring on their mechanical system, they’d avoid trouble.”

HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning) contractors specialize in the installation, inspection, and maintenance of furnaces, boilers, heat pumps, and central air conditioning systems. They may also run diagnostic tests to identify the source of problems or inefficiencies.

“The general contractor is like the conductor of the orchestra,” Dan explains. “He has a broad view of the entire job. And a sub-contractor, like me, runs a portion of the job—in my case, the heating and cooling. Some also do plumbing. The HVAC contractor, in a nutshell, is responsible for comfort. We’re turn-key, so we take care of everything HVAC-related in the house, including the ducting and plumbing. We don’t sub anything else out. It lets us control that package.”



Dan owns Foley Mechanical in Lorton, Virginia, and has been in business since 2002, but has worked in the industry since 1987.

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CERTIFICATION

Foley Mechanical provides all clients and general contractors with a multi-page summary of his company's certifications and expertise. Dan believes it's vital for homeowners to ask for this type of information before hiring an HVAC contractor; that way, they can be confident they are selecting a company that does high-quality work.

"Trade associations such as ACCA and PHCC are great sources of information for consumers," says Dan. "In my opinion, you'll get better information there than from BBB or Yelp reviews. You can find out which contractors are certified, and they offer tips on working with installers."

At the bare minimum, Dan explains that homeowners need to make sure the contractor has a state license and certificate of insurance. If something goes wrong—the worker starts a fire or otherwise causes damage—your bases are covered. Certification and insurance protects the homeowner by allowing recourse through the state. "You'd expect [license and certification to be in place], but that's not always the case," warns Dan.

In short, do not assume a business is certified. Choosing to use one that's not is a risky move that might save money up front but could hurt you in the long run.





FRANCHISES VS LOCAL CONTRACTOR BUSINESSES

Where to turn first? Is it better to hire a franchise or a private small business that is certified by a particular company like The Unico System? The answer is that each has its advantages.

“Franchises do lead to uniformity in training and so they serve a place in our industry,” says Dan, who points out that small businesses may be a better fit for specialty jobs—like those involving historic preservation mandates. “As a small-business owner, I have more flexibility than a franchise might, especially on projects that don’t fit the mold. However, it may make sense to call a franchise for a simple task or service call. Every job is unique. Figure out what’s best for you for this job. Ask, Have you done this before? With this exact system? The time to ask questions is before the job has started, not after.”

Dan says many HVAC manufacturers have a preferred list of contractors, and it’s important to ask if the installer you are talking to is on any of those lists. Foley is a Unico Preferred Contractor, which means he’s gone through numerous Unico training sessions both in-person and online.”

“With Unico the contractors go into the factory to learn how to install and to get factory-certified,” Dan explains. He says Unico offers ongoing training year-round through webinars and in-person regional trainings. The purpose is to provide ongoing support and to educate contractors on how to succeed with unique or tricky installations that require more knowledge.





CHECKING REFERENCES

Next on your list: verify references. Nothing beats a word-of-mouth recommendation from a family member or friend. Knowing that someone used a particular contractor and was satisfied with the work goes a long way.

Second best is finding a contractor through a reliable organization or association. The local chamber of commerce, neighborhood association, or historic review board often keeps a list of references available upon request.

Run a quick check through the Better Business Bureau (BBB), which is structured to help customers find dependable businesses. It not only offers lists of accredited businesses, but also al-

lows unresolved complaints against companies to be viewed by the public. Getting verified and unbiased information during the selection process can save you hundreds of dollars (and hours of headaches).

Sites like Yelp.com offer a platform for reviews—but buyer beware: Yelp reviews are not fact-checked. Angie's List goes a step further by offering background checks on all advertisers and its award winners, as well as a fair Price and Quality Service guarantee of qualified offers purchased by eligible members on Angieslist.com. (Note: You'll need to sign up for a free membership to peruse names.)



CONTRACTS & WARRANTIES



When the time comes, be sure to get everything in writing. The lowest price upfront doesn't always get you the best deal. Take your time reading over contracts and offered warranties.

"I also always suggest keeping correspondence via email," Dan adds. "Then you have a time and date stamp of what was said, and it may avoid a bad situation. Homeowners have so much on their minds. Keep a record so there is no memory involved."

Consider the benefits and disadvantages of an extended HVAC maintenance service agreement before committing. Basic contracts tend to include checkups and tune-ups at the start of summer and winter seasons. Some incorporate parts and service for issues discovered during routine check-ups. Proper maintenance performed on a regular basis may extend the life of your mechanical system. However, as with any type of contract, make sure you know what you are paying for, whether you wind up needing the service or part or not.



FOLLOW-UP MAINTENANCE & REPAIR

Twice a year is the recommended maintenance schedule for an HVAC gas system, for cleaning and safety purposes. In the winter, it's important to see how it's burning and to inspect for carbon monoxide. In summer months, if the drain line is in the ceiling, it should be cleared; otherwise, it can clog and flood through. Getting a tune-up at least once a year can result in a five percent reduction in heating costs.

"It's important to establish a relationship with your service provider," Foley advises. "If you have an ongoing relationship, they will respond to calls during nights, weekends, and holidays; otherwise, you'll be at the back of the list."

Finding the right HVAC contractor doesn't have to be overly time consuming; doing your homework on the front end probably saves time and money in the long run. Hiring a trusted company with reliable references ensures years of HVAC comfort and efficiency.



To find out more about The Unico System or to find a Unico Preferred Contractor near you, [click here](#)



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