



THE CONCRETE COUNTERTOP INSTITUTE

How to Evaluate a Concrete Countertop Maker

Overall Process

If you are a homeowner or building owner who plans to work directly with a concrete countertop maker, here are overall steps for the process. If you work with a design professional such as a kitchen designer or interior designer, they will perform many of these steps for you or guide you through the process.

1. Look for a local concrete countertop maker:
 1. Look on www.concretecountertopinstitute.com in the Find a Contractor listing.
 2. Ask family, friends, and neighbors for referrals and call local kitchen designers or architects for recommendations.
 3. Do a web search using a phrase such as “concrete countertops Denver”.
2. After you have identified several contractors, schedule appointments for showroom or site meetings. You can either take a dimensioned sketch of your project to the contractor, or he/she can come to the site to do an estimate. Most estimates will be free, but confirm in advance.
3. During your meeting, describe the “look” you’d like to achieve and ask questions.
4. Evaluate your quotes, request references, and check the references. Ask to see examples of other projects recently completed by the contractor. Do a thorough Evaluation using the form in the next section. Also inspect their work using the form in the last section.
5. Request proof of liability insurance and workers’ compensation insurance (if required), and proof of any licenses required in your state.
6. Select a contractor you believe is skilled and trustworthy, and with whom you feel comfortable.
7. Make sure everything you and your contractor agree to is included in your contract. A contract is extremely important to make sure that you and your contractor both understand exactly what he or she is making for you. Don’t sign anything until you understand and agree with all the terms.
8. Plan your project carefully, then keep the lines of communication open with your contractor throughout the project. Keep a job file of all important documentation.
9. Ask your contractor to estimate a realistic time frame for the job and plan accordingly. Keep in mind that concrete countertops may take longer than other types of countertops.
10. Arrange for periodic inspections with your contractor to ensure that the work is being performed to achieve the desired end result.

Evaluation Form

For each concrete countertop maker you are considering hiring, find out the answers to the following questions.

How long have they been making concrete countertops?

Don't necessarily dismiss new contractors. Do be aware that they probably won't have a large production capacity. Ask about their training and experience. Always see examples of their work.

Experienced contractors should have a portfolio of work that you can see and possibly inspect. They should be able to provide high quality work along with a higher production capacity.

What other forms of concrete work do they currently do or used to do?

Some concrete countertop contractors come from a decorative concrete background and still offer those services. Decorative concrete generally refers to decorative flatwork, like stamped concrete or overlays, acid stained floors or driveways, etc. Ordinary concrete work like plain driveways, foundations or walls is very different from countertops. Tolerances and aesthetics for these are vastly different. The inexperienced concrete contractor tends to make countertops in a similar fashion to sidewalks.

Are concrete countertops all they do or is this a side business)?

Are they a builder or general contractor or concrete contractor who offers to do the occasional concrete countertop, or are they a cabinet shop that also offers concrete countertops? Make sure that if the contractor does other types of work, that concrete countertops are a focus, and not just a "loss leader" or an attempt to differentiate from the competition, without real dedication to excellence in concrete countertops.

How many employees do they have?

Most concrete countertop contractors have 1 to 5 employees. Larger contractors can handle more projects at once, while smaller contractors can handle fewer.

How many projects have they done?

The more projects they have completed the better they should be. There's no substitute for experience, and the more projects done successfully the better indication that they are doing something right. However, don't necessarily dismiss someone who is just getting started. Ask these folks about training.

What sort of formal training (if any) have they had?

Learning to make high quality concrete countertops involves much more than reading a book or watching a video. Formal training provides contractors with the education and experience they need so that they don't end up learning by trial and error - on your projects.

What memberships do they hold?

There is no formal association or certification for concrete countertops. However, there are groups that indicate an investment in continuing education and marketing, and therefore a level of professionalism. One of those groups is The Concrete Countertop Institute (CCI) membership program. Members declare at the time of joining that they uphold the Standards published on the CCI website.

Ask for and check up on references.

There's more to a successful countertop job than a pretty countertop that fits well. Ask the reference about their experience dealing with the contractor. Was the contractor professional and helpful? Prompt and courteous? Did he or she set and then meet the client's expectations?

VERY IMPORTANT: Ask about how their countertops are sealed, how they are maintained, and how the contractor will support them after the sale.

The sealer is the most variable and important element in a concrete countertop. There's no ideal sealer, and the performance and appearance of different sealers can widely vary. It's very important for the contractor to educate the client about how the concrete will perform, what it can take, what it can't take, how it is maintained and how it is repaired. The contractor should be intimately familiar with the sealers he offers and should provide the client with information and support after the countertops are installed.

Ask the contractor how a scratch, chip or stain would be repaired.

Accidents can happen. A knowledgeable contractor will know how to take care of them should they occur.

Ask for an owner's guide and other documentation or instructions.

Too many times homeowners feel abandoned once the countertops are installed. All countertops require care and some degree of maintenance. A high quality professional contractor should provide the homeowner with information about caring for and maintaining their countertops.

Ask how the concrete is made and how it is reinforced to be structurally sound.

There are many right ways to make a countertop. Use www.concretecountertopinstitute.com to educate yourself about the basic principles and techniques common to all quality concrete countertops.

Ask about their current project capacity.

Newer contractors or smaller contractors may not be able to handle multiple projects at the same time. Larger contractors, or experience contractors with larger shops can handle more projects.

Inspecting a Contractor's Work

Go and see samples of their work (finished pieces and concrete samples). Look for fit, finish, and overall quality. The following are basic countertop quality criteria. A complete list of concrete countertop standards can be found at www.concretecountertopinstitute.com.

For precast: Are adjacent slabs flush and even with a neat, uniform seam? Make sure there are no large gaps, uneven surfaces or misaligned seams.

For precast: Do the slabs sit flat on the cabinets? Make sure there are not unsightly gaps and exposed shims showing.

For precast: Do seams line up in an aesthetically pleasing manner? For example, a seam in the center of a cabinet box should line up exactly with the center line of the cabinet, not be placed at a random, haphazard location.

Is the countertop thickness uniform?

Are straight edges really straight?

Is the underside of the countertop smooth and free of sealer drips?

Are edge details uniform?

Is the sheen even? (The sheen may be anything from matte to high gloss.)

Is the surface free of pinholes or voids?

Are there any gross color defects?

For precast: Do adjacent slabs look alike in terms of color and aggregate exposure?

For undermount sinks: Is the shape of the sink hole smooth and evenly aligned with the sink? Is the joint between the sink and the concrete sealed to prevent leakage?

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