

Seven Things to Know Before Hiring an HVAC Company

Introduction

Your home's HVAC system is one of the most important in your home. In the summer, it keeps you comfortable and safe from the deadly heat. In the winter, it prevents your family from getting sick from exposure.

An efficient HVAC system is one of the best modern conveniences available to us - but what do you do when it breaks? Should you have it repaired, or completely replaced? Could you do it yourself, or do you need a professional? How much do these types of repairs cost? Is it less expensive to get this work done at certain times of the year?

These are just a few questions that people tend to ask themselves when their HVAC system breaks. This short report will help answer your questions, as well as a few others that you may not have considered.

The first thing to discuss is whether or not you should have the system repaired or completely replaced.

Should I Have My HVAC Repaired or Replaced?

In this economy, everyone tries to save money wherever they can, right? Nobody has a limitless budget, so we usually want to avoid completely replacing broken things if we can. In the case of an HVAC system, getting an entirely new furnace or air conditioner unit can be pretty expensive so many people try to simply repair the old unit first.

Even though that's not always the *best* way to go, there are a few inexpensive repairs you can do to try fixing the system. The best time to do these is if you don't plan on living in the home for much longer, have a very low repair budget, or if your equipment is fairly new.

Basic HVAC Repairs

If you haven't tried replacing your filters, give that a try. This will help your system run more efficiently and save you a good bit of money.

Is your home always too hot or too cold? It may be that insulation, not the HVAC system, is the issue.

You can also take a look at your home's ductwork to see if there are any leaks. It could be that sealing up a few leaks is all you really need to do. One sign that this may be the issue is if your home seems to have a lot of dust floating around.

If your home still uses a pilot light, consider switching it with an electronic ignition switch.

Finally, if it's your AC that isn't working, your air conditioner might just need some R22 Freon. You can choose to do this yourself or have professional do it - either way works.

If these don't work, it may be time to get the system replaced. Here are a few things to consider before you replace the system.

Questions to Ask Before Replacing the System

How old is your system? If your air conditioner is older than 10 years, or your furnace/boiler is at least 15 years old, it's definitely time for a new one. Technology has improved a lot over the years, and newer units are more efficient and longer-lasting than they used to be.

How's your home doing on the Home Energy Yardstick? There is a website (https://www.energystar.gov/index.cfm?fuseaction=HOME_ENERGY_YARDSTICK.showGetStarted) that allows you to measure how energy-efficient your home is doing. If your home isn't doing too well, replacing the unit is probably your best option.

What's the current weather like? If it's a beautiful fall outside right now, you can probably wait a few weeks or months before you replace your system. But if the weather is extremely hot or cold, you'll need to handle this issue ASAP. Often the easiest way to do this is just to get a new piece of equipment.

Are you moving soon? If you're about to move into another home, you may want to consider just doing everything you can to fix the system before you leave. The idea is that you can let the next person coming in deal with the system. There are 2 problems with this train of thought though. The first problem is that if you're selling the home, the next owner's inspector will find the issue and probably ask you to pay for it or lower your selling price. The second is that even if you rent out the home or the next owners don't catch it, you'll have that bad feeling in the back of your mind that they're living in a home without heat or air conditioning!

The Bottom Line is...

If your system isn't very old, see what you can do to get it repaired. If it's pretty old or just in very bad condition, your best option is to get it replaced.

How do I Find an HVAC Company to Suit My Needs?

You as the consumer have more research tools at your disposal than ever before. These tools and resources allow you to make the best decision possible before hiring any kind of contractor. This is obviously great news to you, as you'll be able to save a lot of money and frustration over the years if you do your due diligence.

Even though there are tons of different resources available, you can break them down into 3 main areas: referrals, phone books and the internet. Let's start by talking about referrals.

Referrals

For thousands of years, people have relied on referrals from friends or family before they made a purchase. Everything from contracting work to pairs of shoes has been purchased based on referrals. We tend to trust our loved ones, which is why we so often ask for advice from friends, family, coworkers and neighbors.

The main problem with referrals is that sometimes people are biased. For example, someone may recommend their uncle's HVAC company just because it's owned by their uncle.

Another problem is that just because you love someone doesn't mean they will give you the best advice! For example, they might recommend the only HVAC company they've ever used. Even though they may have had a great experience, if they don't have much to compare the company to, they couldn't really know how professional, fast or affordable the contractor really was.

Overall, referrals are a great place to start. Ask your loved ones if they've had any work done on their HVAC system over the last few years. If so, see if they would recommend (or NOT recommend!) the HVAC company they used.

The Phone Book

It used to be that if you didn't have any friends or family who could refer you to a company, you'd have to just go with the phone book. You can usually find dozens if not hundreds of HVAC companies here, so you have to be careful.

Unfortunately there's not much you can do to help you differentiate between these companies. Most people end up just picking a company based on their name, their slogan, or just the format/picture of their advertisement!

The other thing is, if you're like most people with the internet, you just recycle the phone books that get delivered to your front door. It's kind of sad, but that's the way it is in the 21st century.

The Internet

Ah, the internet - the greatest research tool ever invented. You can literally find information on ANYTHING you want, including HVAC companies.

There are generally 2 ways to look for possible companies to help you out. The first method is to simply go to Google.com and type in "HVAC contractor." A list of local companies should come up, and you can then check out their websites to help you make a decision.

The other method is to use a review website like Angie's List. You have to pay to become a member, but these sites allow members to review just about any kind of contractor, store or restaurant that you can think of. This is a great way to get information from actual customers of the companies you're looking into, and these unbiased customers will almost always tell it to you straight.

"Okay, so I've selected a few companies to talk to... now what?"

The next step is the easy one. Just call 3-5 different HVAC companies and explain your problem. They probably won't be able to give you a price estimate over the phone, but you can still learn a few things from this conversation.

For example, you'll learn how polite the people are. The contractor should be very patient and polite to you as their potential client. If they aren't polite, just move on to the next one.

Another thing is you can learn about their availability. If you have an emergency but they're not available for 1-2 months, you might want to try a different company.

To Tie it All Together...

We recommend focusing on referrals and the internet to find good HVAC companies. Once you've selected a few, give them a call and see what you think about their personality and availability.

The best ones will be polite, have lots of satisfied customers, and do everything they can to help you in a timely manner.

What Equipment Should I Consider?

HVAC stands for Heating, Ventilation and Cooling. Therefore it makes sense that the main equipment you should consider comes into those three categories.

First, make sure you invest in central heating. That's probably what you're used to, as it allows one unit to heat up the whole house. This is much more efficient than the small window or electric heaters that some people use to warm up a room.

The heating equipment you have available for central heating can be a furnace, heat pump or boiler. Each of these has its own advantages and disadvantages. Chances are, the HVAC contractor that you hire can recommend their favorite brands and equipment. Once you have their recommendations, you can look around online to see what other people think of those brands and models.

The same goes for cooling. You want central cooling, not just a window unit. Window units can be useful for a bedroom, but you definitely don't want to be cooling off your entire home with just these small, inefficient units.

Central cooling systems usually use either a heat pump or a free cooling system. Free cooling systems are generally more efficient, but most homes still use heat pumps and compressors for cooling.

Regarding the ventilation equipment - most homes don't need new ductwork. You might be one of the "lucky" ones that does need new ducts, but most of the time issues with ventilation can be fixed with a bit of sealant. The main time this isn't true is if it's an extremely old system or if you've added onto the home and need ventilation to come to the new room.

Don't worry too much about what kind of equipment to get. Part of why you're doing research into an HVAC company is so that they can make good recommendations, right? So let them give a few suggestions, and then you can follow up by researching what they recommended.

What are the General Costs and Considerations?

First, we want to make it clear that just replacing an old unit is completely different than getting an entirely new HVAC system put into place. **To build something new “from the ground up”, expect your prices to be 2 – 3 times more than what we discuss in the next few paragraphs.**

How much you can expect to pay will depend on where you live. Everything costs more in big cities and certain states, while more rural areas can expect a lower price tag.

Generally, installing a new furnace will cost between \$1,300 and \$1,700. This includes 4 main costs:

- The furnace itself
- Labor
- Parts/supplies to install the furnace
- Tools to install the furnace

These are the main types of costs you can expect for just about any work done on your home, right? Even though every contractor will have different prices, at the end of the day these are the main categories that they’re considering.

Replacing an air conditioner has a similar cost breakdown. The only difference is that you’re buying an air conditioning unit instead of a furnace or heater. The average cost to replace your a/c unit ranges from \$2,400 to \$3,700, again depending on the area, what make/model you get, etc.

Finally, the cost to replace ductwork averages from \$8 - \$11 per linear foot right now. So if you’re looking to replace about 50 feet of ductwork, expect your total bill to be between \$400 and \$550.

You may be able to get a discount depending on the time of year, how busy the current market is, if you’re military, etc. But in general, expect your estimates to fall within the ranges listed above.

Speaking of the estimate, let’s talk about what to expect.

Understanding Estimates and Negotiating

When you receive an estimate from an HVAC contractor, you should know what's included. It never hurts to ask for clarification, but these next few paragraphs will help you get started.

Generally, here's a list of things that should be included in the estimate:

- Cost of equipment and materials
- Transportation to/from the job site
- Setup and cleanup time (setup includes anything done to protect your home and personal possessions)
- Installation and testing of the new equipment
- Debris removal upon completion

Sound like everything? Well it is a lot, but not quite *everything*. Here are a few things that you probably won't see on the estimate:

- Sales tax
- Permit or inspection fees (if you have a building inspector come out)
- General contractor fees (these won't apply to you unless a general contractor is overseeing the installation)

If anything is unclear in the estimate, make sure you ask the contractor. You don't want to think that you're paying for debris cleanup just to find out (too late!) that the estimate didn't include that part.

Now let's talk about negotiations in case you aren't satisfied with the current estimate.

Negotiations

Many people confuse "negotiations" with "getting everything I want". Remember that it's a 2 way street- the contractor is trying to make a living here, while you're just trying to get an affordable, quality HVAC repair or replacement.

The first thing to do is to look at the estimate and see if anything seems a little high. For example, maybe the debris removal is a lot higher than you'd anticipated. Or maybe the furnace price is listed much higher than what you'd seen online.

In these cases, chances are the contractor is trying to make a little more profit off of you. Some profit is okay, but a huge markup on the equipment is a no-no. Do some research and if you can find the furnace for a much lower cost, ask the contractor to lower their price.

Another thing you can do is ask for a cash discount. Companies have to pay a lot of money to credit card companies anytime they run a card. If you have the means to pay with cash or a check, you'd be saving the contractor both time and money. Some will give you a discount to encourage this kind of payment.

Finally, try to negotiate on time. See if they can put your project as a higher priority if you pay with cash or check. This is extremely important in the summer months when every HVAC company is slammed!

Making Sure Everything is Planned Well and Goes Smoothly

Some people plan too much, and most people don't plan NEARLY enough! It's better to be in the first group.

Here are a few things you can do to help make sure everything goes swimmingly:

- Tidy up the house before the HVAC company gets there. If they have to dodge around toys, pets and furniture all day long, it will take them longer and they might break something on accident.
- Get all of the paperwork squared away. Warranties, guarantees, the estimate, negotiations and insurance. If something goes wrong, whether it's during installation or a few years down the road, you want to be covered.
- If you'll be home, try not to park in the driveway. You want to give the contractor easy access to your home so they can carry in and out all of the equipment and materials quickly. The longer setup takes, the longer you'll be without your HVAC system.
- Is ductwork being installed? If not, consider adding new insulation to the attic and basement. This will allow your new unit to be that much more efficient once installed.
- Get the cell phone number for your main point of contact, and make sure they have your number. If something goes wrong, you need to be able to contact each other quickly and work things out.
- Once the work is complete, do a visual inspection of the unit and everywhere that the contractors worked. Even though you aren't an HVAC expert, you should be able to tell if the ductwork looks bad, the air condition isn't steady, a huge mess got left outside on the side of the house, etc.

In reality, you can never have 100% certainty that things will go according to plan. Accidents happen every day, that's just how it goes. But by preparing for the worst, you can at least be ready in case something does happen.

Other Important Questions to Ask an HVAC Company

When you start interviewing HVAC companies, here are a few great questions to ask. If you think of any others then feel free to add them to this list!

- Are your workers NATE certified?
- Are you insured? Is it for general liability, workmen's compensation or both?
- Are you licensed by the state to do HVAC?
- How long have you been in business under this name?
- Are you a member of any trade organizations?
- Are your technicians certified to handle Freon?
- Do you have carbon monoxide analyzers?
- Will all of your technicians wear uniforms and name badges?
- Do you have a refund policy? Can you give me the details?
- Do you have any unresolved complaints with the Better Business Bureau?
- What energy-efficient options do I have?
- What kind of warranty do I get?
- What kind of regular maintenance do I need to do once installed?
- Will a third party inspect the system?
- Do you have referrals I can talk to? How about testimonials from previous customers?

Again, this is just to help get you started. If you can think of anything else, feel free to ask them.

Conclusion

Finding the right HVAC contractor for your project, whether it's small or large, can seem daunting. The best thing you can do is break everything down into small steps and keep moving forward, one step at a time.

The most important thing is to do your research without going overboard. Realize that you'll never find a perfect HVAC company, but you should definitely be able to find a good one that you're happy with.