



Highlights: Cabinets and Countertops

America's kitchen fixation has cooked up big business for cabinets and countertops, which usually account for about half the cost of a kitchen remodel. *Washington Consumers' Checkbook*, online at www.checkbook.org, priced cabinets and countertops at local independent and big-box retailers and guides homeowners through the process of planning a kitchen remodel and keeping costs down. Highlights from Checkbook's report:

Getting Started

- Ask yourself: What do you like or dislike about your current kitchen? How do you plan to use the kitchen—a center of family activities; a place to eat most or all meals; for gourmet-level cooking? Do you want to make structural changes? Replace appliances? How much are you willing to spend?
- Strongly consider professional design help: Pros (usually a kitchen designer or architect) know how to make kitchens look better, function more efficiently, and cost less. With their expertise, you can avoid mishaps. And if suppliers or installers mess up, a pro has more leverage to push for making it right.
- If you decide to hire a pro, interview several. When meeting with designers, assess their taste and how easy it is to communicate with them. A meeting in your existing kitchen is likely to hatch the best ideas.
- When you find a promising candidate, ask for references, and if possible, tour a kitchen that the designer has recently done and thinks would match your taste.
- Checkbook recommends arrangements that let you compare prices and buy from a supplier other than the designer if the price is right. For this freedom, it's worth paying a design fee.

Choosing Cabinets (and Avoiding High Prices)

- You will have to decide on the number, types, and sizes of cabinets; type of wood; door style; finish; knobs; and accessories. The websites of major manufacturers display types, styles, and finishes; provide assistance with creating plans; and answer many of your questions. These sites are great resources.
- Get several suppliers to bid on your job. Checkbook's undercover shoppers collected bids for 16 specific KraftMaid cabinets. Here is what they found:
 - There was major price variation among dealers—a difference of \$3,920, from \$5,961 to \$9,881.
 - Home Depot and Lowe's did not offer the lowest prices.
 - Although Checkbook provided dealers with a list of specific cabinets, a number offered to come to the home to confirm measurements at no additional cost.
- If new cabinets would bust your budget, painting or re-facing existing cabinets is a good option if you are OK with your layout and your cabinets are well-constructed and in good condition under the surface.

Comparing Countertop Costs

- Countertop materials range from wood to plastics to metal to stone, and for each you can save plenty by shopping for the best price.
- To supply and install a Black Galaxy granite countertop, using the same design, Checkbook's undercover shoppers got bids from \$2,100 to \$3,895. Home Depot and Lowe's did not offer the lowest prices.
- Ask retailers about their warranties. Because manufactured counter materials are brand-name and engineered, they usually come with a guarantee against chips, scratching, or warping for 10 to 20 years. Granite and natural stones are usually ineligible for such warranties.
- Most vendors can have your new countertops installed within 10 days, unless your material is out of stock. Be sure your designer or countertop seller comes to measure to prevent cutting mistakes.

Checkbook's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.