

WASHINGTON CONSUMERS'
CHECKBOOK
Highlights: Electricians

DIY is an option for most home improvement and repair projects. But most consumers smartly leave electrical work to the professionals. With comprehensive ratings of local electricians and results from its undercover price shopping, *Washington Consumers' Checkbook*, online at www.checkbook.org, gives consumers the power to find quality electrical work at a fair price. Some findings from Checkbook's report:

- To avoid overpaying, get three or more price quotes for each job. Checkbook's undercover shoppers found that even the best contractors offer wildly different prices. For example:
 - To replace a ceiling light fixture with a customer-supplied new ceiling fan with light attachment, prices ranged from \$150 to \$525.
 - Prices for replacing six wall outlet receptacles and one light switch with new outlets and wall plates ranged from \$125 to \$729.
 - To install a customer-supplied outdoor floodlight, prices ranged from \$125 to \$482.
- You don't have to pay more to get high-quality work. The companies that received Checkbook's top rating for quality were actually more likely to charge low prices than companies with lower ratings.
- Although it is always best to get a fixed-price bid, companies usually visit homes to provide free price quotes for only relatively large jobs; you can get bids by phone only when you know exactly what needs to be done. For smaller jobs, you'll likely have to pay on a time-and-materials basis.
- Hourly labor rates don't reflect differences in charges for materials, and don't reflect the work pace of different companies. When comparing hourly labor rates and minimum fees, check these details:
 - Does the company impose a minimum charge for service calls? If so, how much? How much time does it cover? Is travel time charged against this minimum? While most companies charge the same minimum service fee regardless of job location, it's a point worth checking.
 - Into what increments does the company divide its billing time (i.e. quarter or half hours)?
 - How much does the company charge per time unit?
 - How does the company handle fractions of time units? (For example, does it round to the nearest half hour—either up or down—or always round up?)
 - How many electricians does the rate cover?
 - Does the company ever charge for service based on a flat rate rather than actual hours?
- If possible, get a written price quote before work begins. The price should be a fixed price that covers all work, rather than an estimate based on material costs plus an hourly rate. Make sure the proposal specifies exactly what you want done, including:
 - Makes and model numbers of all supplied fixtures.
 - Where new wiring will run.
 - Who cuts holes in the wall, patches the holes, and repaints the patches. If this type of work isn't covered in the proposal, it won't get done.
 - If permits are required, make sure that the company must secure them.
 - When work is to begin and how long it will take.
 - Negotiate for the best possible warranty. Seek at minimum one year.
 - Try to withhold as much payment as possible until all work is done. Companies that let you withhold a large portion of the price of a job until completion indicate they are confident they can satisfy you. You also get leverage for getting the job redone if you are dissatisfied.
 - If possible, pay by credit card. If you are dissatisfied, you can dispute the charge with your credit card company.

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