

Solar Buying Guide-Selecting a Contractor

Next to “How much does it cost,” one of the most common questions for people considering retrofitting their homes with solar panels is “How do I choose a solar installer?” Since the average home requires a solar investment in the range of \$8,000-15,000, naturally you want to make sure that the people you hire are knowledgeable and trustworthy professionals. Here are a few considerations to help you make a well informed decision.

Credentials

Make sure your solar installer is certified by the North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners (www.NABCEP.org). If so, you know company personnel passed a rigorous series of exams and have adequate on the job experience. Sure, there may be perfectly good installers who are not NABCEP-certified, but if you’re looking for the gold standard of achievement, this is it. Another certification to look for is accreditation by the Southern Arizona Solar Standards Board (www.SASSB.org), as recommended by TEP, which is a local Tucson best practices group. Best practices include: upfront disclosure about all costs, benefits, 10 year workmanship warranties, and power production guarantees, safe and properly sized electrical runs and connections, and most importantly, proper roof attachment procedures.

Licenses/Insurance

Since your solar installer will be climbing around on your roof, the “danger” element cannot be ignored. In the event of a tumble, you want to know that the solar installer is fully licensed, bonded and insured, so you won’t end up footing the emergency room bills. The bare minimum a responsible solar installer will carry is general liability insurance, worker’s compensation insurance and the proper C-11, L-11, or K-11 Electrical contractor’s license. A common practice among the predatory “solar” companies is to sell solar systems while not properly licensed, and then use a third party to obtain the permit and skirt contracting law.

Reputation

Is your solar installer in good standing with the local permitting authorities, utility companies and citizens? One way to get the inside scoop on a local business is to look them up on the Better Business Bureau website (www.bbb.org), where you can see: How long they’ve been in business, Where the company is located, If they are an approved member of the BBB, What grade they received (A-F), Whether any complaints have been filed against the company over the past 3 years, and How those claims were resolved. Another important place to check is the Arizona Registrar of Contractors (www.azroc.gov), where you can verify that they have the proper electrical license, and see if they have had any complaints filed against them. Online reviews are also good to look for, with Angie’s List and Google reviews being a great place to look, but also ask for references!

Quality

While shopping for well priced systems is important, never choose a solar installer solely based on price. For example, one solar installer may offer rock-bottom rates because they subcontract work out to a third party of independent contractors or to workers who are not properly certified/licensed. Or they may be cheaper because they install low-quality brands manufactured overseas. You also want to make sure the solar installer offers a substantial workmanship warranty. Since most solar installations take 8-12 years to recoup the cost, your warranty should be at least 10 years. Ask for references, and your potential installer should have a good size list to choose from.

Location

The local solar installer is always preferable to out of town contractors, who maintain local phone numbers and fake offices, but have to provide service from afar and bring the profits away from the Tucson economy. Local installers understand local building codes and utility requirements, and are keeping the monies for labor and parts here in Tucson. Being green and keeping it local go hand in hand!

Payment Options

A good solar installer will work with you to find a method that is affordable for you. Make sure the quote you receive explicitly indicates what sort of payback and monthly electrical bill savings you can expect. Also make sure you know what percentage of your energy needs the system will cover. Most companies will offer you the option to make a capital purchase with or without a variety of financing options, and some may offer leases or power purchase agreements. Be wary of contractors who want to steer you into a 30 page monthly lease agreement, which is in many cases a bad form of financing and may make the sale of the home more difficult.

Once you've called several qualified providers to bid on the project, you should be able to find the best company to provide a high quality, economical system that is custom designed for your home. However, before you sign on the dotted line, be sure you ask for and phone a few referrals to find out if the solar installer is as candid as they seem.

Thank you for taking the time to educate yourself on good buying practices in the solar industry. At Custom Solar and Leisure, we appreciate informed customers who have the desire to save money, reduce their environmental footprint, and support local business! We would love to be one the companies you select to provide an estimate for your home, please give us a call today!

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