

Tricks of the trade: How to beat cheats

The following is a list of ways homeowners can avoid being cheated or conned by unscrupulous home repair servicemen and salesmen, as compiled by a veteran home repair scam artist who revealed the tricks of his trade to the Sun-Times:

1. Never leave tradesmen or their "service managers" alone in the basement with your heating equipment *no matter what they tell you*. Unscrupulous operators use that time to tamper with machinery. For the same reason, never leave them alone outside the house near a cooling unit.

2. Never let them touch your heating or cooling system—even while you are present—without a complete explanation, in terms you can understand, of what they are doing and why.

3. Always shop and get *at least three* opinions. Most legitimate companies are happy to send out an estimator to give homeowners a specific, written proposal at no charge. An estimate should include details about the brand and capacity (described in BTUs) of equipment to be installed.

4. Always find out whether the company that will do the work is the same firm doing the selling. If subcontractors are doing the work, get *their* names and check *their* reputations. Even companies with well-known names and excellent reputations often have subcontractors perform the work, and some of them are not as reliable as the company you called.

5. Make certain the company doing the work is licensed, bonded and insured. Phonies are not. If the salespeople say they have such coverage, make them show a copy of the license and documents certifying the bond and insurance. Ask for names and telephone numbers of satisfied customers *and speak with them*.

6. If you need work done, check reputations with local senior citizens groups and the Better Business Bureau before you contact a repair company. Ask about performance, but don't depend entirely on a clean slate. The Sun-Times' informant says some sharp operators are able to sneak complaints out of the files.

7. If you sign a contract, get the salesperson's full name and ask to see a driver's license to confirm it. Write down the license number. If the salesperson resists, call the job off—right now.

8. Be aware that unscrupulous home repair contractors consider older people and women alone their easiest prey.

9. Be extra cautious when a mechanic wants to summon his "service manager" or "the boss" to a home. Any competent mechanic can diagnose a problem. Often, the guy he sends for is the shark, the "closer."

10. Cut this list out of your newspaper and paste it on your furnace or air-conditioner.