

Don't Make These 12 Mistakes During Your Custom Home Build — As Told by an Industry Insider.



Building a new custom home is one of the biggest investments that you can make. There are thousands of decisions to be made starting from choosing the builder and their processes, all the way through making the selections for the finishes of the home. The entire process is a symphony of collaborating factors that all lean heavily on the previous decisions and weigh mightily on any subsequent ones.

With 8 years as a Selections Coordinator for a high-end custom home builder in Omaha, NE., I've had the pleasure of being on the frontlines and the main point of contact for hundreds of customers, Superintendents, vendors and subcontractors on thousands of newly built homes in the area. It's an intense process, to be sure. Over the years, I've seen several missteps in the selections and custom home building process.

Here's the list of the BIGGEST MISTAKES new construction customers make when building their dream home.

1) READ YOUR CONTRACT & DOCUMENTS- This should go without saying. Read and have at least a basic understanding of the information contained in your custom build documents. Everything from your plumbing fixture models to the types of windows and insulation is in there. You DO have the chance to ask questions, gain clarity and make changes BEFORE you sign contracts. But the number of times I've had to copy and paste a section of a homeowner's own signed documents back to them is in the hundreds, I'm sure.

In most cases, whether you decide to add it up front, or after the build has begun, the cost will be roughly the same. The main difference is that having almost everything contained in the original plan sets and documents is far more preferred by all involved versus having to look through change orders or emails for items that you've decided to add or change after signing.

2) "PLEASE" AND "THANK YOU" STILL RULE- Demanding, rude, pushy, entitled customers get deprioritized- EVERY TIME. This should be common sense, but it bears mentioning. As custom home builders we FULLY expect to run into our fair share of entitled and "higher up" type A customers. We know that you want what you want. We can pretty much accommodate any request.

We know that you're able to build a million-dollar house in this economy because you've got the money and back assets. But you know what money DOESN'T buy? Class. Manners. Grace. Patience. Kindness. And guess which customers are pushed to the front of the line when we have to decide which pricing requests to get back to first? Not the ones that have asked 20 questions on 20 separate emails where 4 of them directly contradict information or requests from one of the other emails. Cut it out.

Understand that you are NOT your builder's only client. Nor is your builder their vendors' only customers. It's always good to realize that if it's not already a priced option somewhere in your paperwork, it'll most likely take DAYS to get information back. Put your patience panties on and wait for your answers. But I can tell you 100% that I'd rather get a list of 10 well thought out requests on 1 email than a bunch of half-baked narratives scattered throughout several emails sent at all times of day and night.

This is also the responsibility of the builder to create realistic expectations. But as a functioning adult in society, remember to use "please" and "thank you," and watch how much more attentive your builder, vendors and Superintendents become to your requests.

3) NOT PROPERLY VETTING THE BUILDER- If you ONLY checked the builder's website and a couple of "5 Star" Google reviews, you could be in for a world of hurt. NOTHING in the building process is seamless. NOTHING is perfect, and there will be mistakes and miscommunications. Assuming a perfectly smooth build is an unrealistic expectation. And if your builder doesn't CLEARLY explain this aspect, you need to RUN.

Transparency of the build process, communication and your responsibilities as the customer are far more important than having a "perfect build." There will always be a good amount of give and take in terms of requested changes you may want to explore versus what can be done due to certain area code requirements. How will these requests be handled? Are they clearly explained? Are they priced quickly for approvals?

Depending on the size of the home and the waitlist of your builder, you will be in constant contact with your builder's office, their vendors and Superintendents for between 6 months to 2 years. There HAS to be a rapport and a mutual respect that is felt from the very first meeting. You need to like AND respect the company that will be in charge of taking your dream home from a dream to reality!

4) DON'T RUSH YOUR BUILDER FOR PRICING OPTIONS- Yes, you're super excited about the ideas you've got. Your financing is in place, and you've found your builder. GIVE THEM TIME to make sure that your dream home is right! This means everything from gathering realistic costs on your custom additions, to correctly documenting your specifications. In so many cases, the customer requests an "add." Something like, "Can we move the tub down and add a cabinet in this bathroom?"

YES! Of Course you can. HOWEVER- moving a tub changes the floor drain location, which may add piping. It changes the size of the tub that can now be installed. Where is the faucet located? Is it a deck mount, or do you now have to frame a small deck from the wall to mount the tub faucet trim from? Does that deck need tile? More tile costs. More needed quartz square footage due to the added cabinet. Moving the tub causes the window to look off-

center. Do we need to move the window? Where are the light switches and overhead light moved in relation to the shifted tub? And on and on.

When you make seemingly simple requests as a customer you **MUST** know that everything leans on everything else. Give your builder time to properly reprice, redraft and double check that all aspects of the request are accounted for.

5) **DON'T RUSH YOUR DECISIONS-** Your builder has an order of operations. They give you a selections schedule in the EXACT order that they need it in order to create a smooth transition between build phases. If they need your roofing shingles selection, **DO NOT** jump all the way to your plumbing fixtures! Take one thing at a time and in order as often as possible. They need roofing shingles shortly after the framing on the roof is complete. Your Superintendent needs to order out your shingle bundles, have the right flashing paper and gutter locations accounted for. They have to make sure that your shingles are approved by the HOA in many cases.

Your tile doesn't matter at this point. What I've found, is that when customers jump to finishes- they often end up selecting items that aren't in stock by the time they need them, which throws their entire vision in the trash and causes undue panic and stress. It's better to have a "feel" or a general color palette to work from versus specific items. The supply and demand of surfaces changes weekly. Do the first things first!

6) **LIMIT THE NUMBER OF OUTSIDE VENDORS & SUPPLIERS-** Your custom builder has a preferred set of vendors for a reason. In the case of my company, there are vendors that they've worked with for decades. They know our process, how to price our selections for customers, how we move through our building processes, what selections to steer you to and where to apply the urgency when customers get stuck looking at too many options. They are the experts that we rely on to help you make complete selections for that phase.

It's great that your cousin's brother's uncle is a plumbing fixtures salesperson. He has no idea about how we run our jobs. They're not in our payment system of registered businesses. The bid he supplied you with doesn't have any of the rough in valves, drains or the correct faucets and is using copper piping- not the CPVC that is required in your new subdivision. **PLEASE** just trust that your builder doesn't want to cause added pain or confusion either. **TRUST YOUR BUILDER.** Some will allow you to provide some of your own items, but it's to your best advantage to take their advice on where to exercise this freedom.

7) **RESPECT YOUR BUILDER'S BUSINESS HOURS AND COMMUNICATION POLICIES-** The number of emails, calls and texts that my coworkers get after 5pm on weekdays is **CRAZY**. We understand that things pop into your mind, and you may want some quick feedback. Look at your clock. What time is it? If it's after 5pm or **ANYTIME** on a weekend, save your question for the next business day. It's easy enough to start an email draft and set your **OWN** reminder to send it the next business morning.

Your Superintendent would also like to eat their dinner without their customers sending them question after question after they've clocked out for the day. Much of this is common courtesy. Would you answer the phone if someone called your personal phone on a business matter at 10pm on a Saturday? Absolutely not! Save it. You may think that you're being thorough- and that may partly be true. But most likely, you're being inconsiderate and annoying. Your emails will be the last things that your Super looks at as they prioritize their work for the next day.

8) **IT'S YOUR HOME, NOT YOUR DESIGNER'S-** And I say this as a Freelance Interior Designer. Short story- We received an exterior tile selection from a homeowner (who relied far too heavily on their designer.) Our installer put up roughly 400 SF of this tile on the exterior of this 9,000 SF home. The homeowner let a whole 400 SF of tile get installed and grouted on their home before they decide to email with an "Lol. This tile didn't look as brown when our designer picked it. We actually hate it. Lol." They paid \$6,000.00 to have this all removed and then had to also reselect tile, pay for it and have it re-installed. And this example is a pretty accurate depiction of the entire build with these customers. Their designer would pick one thing, fill out the selection paperwork. We'd price and order, get the

material on site only to have the customer hate it and want to change it, and they'd pay to do it. I promise you that being honest and honoring your OWN style is far more important than the latest design trend.

It's YOUR HOME. Your designer probably is charging you by the hour and gets kickbacks on certain recommended materials. They're not the ones that have to PAY for the changes or suffer the effects of a delayed timeline when they make choices that you end up despising. Ultimately, you need to make sure to listen to their input and ideas, but YOU have the final say in the finishes that go into your home.

Part B to this; Don't bring your realtor or your design savvy family member into your selections communications. Again, it's not their house. And I've found that the more people that you involve in the process, the more complicated it becomes. The whole "too many cooks in the designer kitchen" thing. They start to project their desires into your build, which casts shadows of doubt on the things that you THOUGHT you really liked or wanted to do.

Your realtor only needs to know about the financial aspects close to closing. Nothing in-between, unless you care to share with them outside of your time communicating with me. I don't owe them any explanation as to why we run our builds the way we do. Their name is not on the purchase agreement. Yours is. You'll be the one living in the house.

9) THAT SPECIALTY THING WON'T ALWAYS HOLD YOUR INVESTMENT VALUE- Everyone has their thing. That one or two aspects of this custom build that they HAVE to splurge and overly obsess over. Some, it's plumbing fixtures and lights. Others, it's the electronics and sound systems. In almost all cases, the return on investment will be nonexistent. I've seen 200k spent on things like TVs and speakers. In a few years, those won't be the latest models available. So, unless you plan on REMOVING all of these electronics and taking them with you to the next house, do the rough ins during the build, but leave the actual purchases of the electronics out of the equation until the build is complete. Really think about how much return on investment you'll get out of that "special thing" if you were to put your house on the market today. Think long term use versus adding the newest sparkly thing.

10) TRUST YOUR BUILDER- In the case of the custom home builder that I work for, they don't run ads. They don't buy tv or radio spots. Our customers are usually found by word of mouth, which we appreciate. That being said- if your friend had a great experience, if you meet with us and decide to move forward, you should trust the things that we're telling you.

We don't churn out sub-par cookie cutter homes. We don't want you to be upset. We don't want our reputation tarnished, and we don't want any legal problems. Your builder has a good rep for a reason. Trust them! If you've done the proper vetting, if you've read through the options and gotten clear answers, if you've walked through your friend's home and spoken to them about their experience, and it all is consistent, TRUST YOUR BUILDER!

11) SOMETIMES IT'S YOU- I can usually tell within the first 2 weeks of emails or phone calls how difficult you'll be to deal with for the next 10 months. I often question the loyalty and honesty of your friends and family if your overall demeanor is extremely unpleasant coming into such an extensively communicative project. I know that you've been taught to believe that "the customer is always right." But let me assure you, customers are some of the MOST WRONG people on the planet. Consider that MAYBE you don't know more about building a home from the ground up than your custom home builder who's done it successfully for decades. That doesn't mean that you don't know what you want, of course. But it DOES mean that you may not know the best way to execute the steps to make what you want to happen.

This loops back to trusting your builder. How do you feel when someone tries to tell you how to do your job that's NOT ACTUALLY in the industry that you specialize in? Annoying, right? Don't be this person. Just like you can give customer feedback, your builder makes notes as well. And usually tracks everything via email to pull back out just in case a point needs to be proven. And be sure that every person down the line that will need to work with you

has a VERY accurate depiction of what you've been like to work with up to that point. So, play nice. Use your manners, common sense and common courtesy and everything will be fine.

12) DON'T WAIT UNTIL CLOSING TO BRING UP YOUR GRIPES- Custom home builds take hundreds of successful collaborations, and there are bound to be a few misunderstandings or miscommunications. But they can't fix what they're not aware of. There's almost nothing worse for a builder to feel like things have gone relatively smoothly, only to be blasted right before closing with a bunch of issues, questions or gripes that you've been holding on to- some of which may not be fixable.

It most certainly leaves all involved feeling frustrated, and colors a MOSTLY good build in a negative light when you wait to air your grievances. I'd 100% rather be able to address your concerns in real time so that we can explore corrections- even if it's an uncomfortable conversation. We're on the same team. We want you to be a satisfied customer, and we want to provide you with excellent service and a home that you'll love for many years. This requires communication.

Custom home building can be an eye-opening and exhilarating experience for those brave enough to undertake the challenge. Just remember this list before you go in to sign that contract. Love this list and need one for your own custom home building business? Blackstone Copywriting Co. is here to help!