

Keeping Kitchen Remolding Expensive Down

To keep remodeling costs in check, you must plan ahead, be willing to compromise, and keep emotions out of the financial picture. Here are some suggestions.

1. Identify affordable alternatives that look like expensive products.

- Many laminates and solid surfaces come in colors and patterns that resemble granite and other natural stone countertops.
- Vinyl flooring, whether tiles or sheets, offers colors and patterns that look like travertine or other stone tile floor options.
- Laminate floors that look like wood are much cheaper than real hardwood floors.
- Reface or refinish existing cabinets instead of buying new ones.
- Choose stock cabinets instead of semi-custom or custom. Most stock cabinetry lines offer more material, color and accessory choices than in the past.
- Counter-depth refrigerators look like built-ins because they don't stick out past the cabinets, but they cost nearly 50 percent less.

2. Don't change the layout much. If you keep your appliances, sinks, faucets, and lights where they are, you can use the existing plumbing and gas lines and electrical outlets. Moving utilities can add up to a lot of labor costs. Also, any time you cut into the walls, you run the risk of uncovering a problem that must be fixed. (See #3.) Many of these problems would need to be addressed eventually; you've just moved up the timeframe.

3. Plan for the worst; hope for the best. The National Association of the Remodeling Industry recommends setting aside at least 10 percent of your budget for unforeseen costs. These may include:

- Asbestos removal
- Mold remediation
- Dry rot
- Upgrades to the electrical service panel
- Termites or carpenter ants in the walls, floor, or windows
- Leaks in the walls from bad plumbing
- Structural problems that require repair
- Rotten window frames
- Improper insulation
- Code upgrades required by inspectors

4. Do some of the labor yourself. Relatively easy jobs include minor demolition (removing cabinets or flooring), painting walls and ceilings, and replacing hardware.

Beware of taking on more than you can handle. It's not uncommon for a do-it-yourselfer to try tackling plumbing or electrical work to save money, then have to hire a professional for a costly fix when the job proves too challenging.

5. Save details and decorating for later. You can always add custom touches and upgrades—trim and moldings, decorative hardware, cabinet organizers, a tile backsplash—down the road. Doing the project in phases probably will cost more in the long run, but it will help you out in the short term.

6. Distinguish between needs, wants and wishes. Make a list of everything you want to do in your new kitchen, then classify each item according to the following system:

- A need is a must-have: a functioning refrigerator, for example.
- A want would be nice and might be achieved: say, a new stainless steel refrigerator. Most people can't afford all of their wants and will have to choose among them or wait until later.
- Wishes are the dream items: perhaps a complete suite of commercial-grade appliances. Some folks can afford their dream kitchens; the rest of us will have to wait until we win the lottery.