



Ensure your builders' track record isn't just shiny tools and a sleek website

## TRADESMEN WEBSITES COMPARED

Most of the 19 websites we looked at appeared sleek and professional, but don't be fooled. It only takes 10 minutes to set up an "approved trader" website, says Steve Playle of Surrey Trading Standards. 'Some that claim they only have approved traders actually let anyone join who is willing to pay the subscription fee. Don't forget they are money-making organisations.' Although not as good as a personal recommendation, these sites could help you in your search:

### [www.ratedpeople.com](http://www.ratedpeople.com)

You supply job details and up to three local firms contact you to quote. Website doesn't vet traders. Previous customers give feedback, which you can only see once a trader has offered to supply you with a quote.

**GHI VERDICT** Good spread of companies and trades and an easy-to-follow website. But you will still need to check qualifications, experience and insurance yourself.

### [www.myhammer.co.uk](http://www.myhammer.co.uk)

You can either provide job details and several traders will quote you, or you can search a directory that includes customer ratings. Not all companies are rated. The site will only display qualifications of

traders who've paid for them to be verified. **GHI VERDICT** Very complicated terms. We like that the directory displays reviews and information clearly. We don't like the quote service, as prices have to be fixed up front.

### [www.vettedtradesmen.org.uk](http://www.vettedtradesmen.org.uk)

You give job details and up to five members will quote you. Traders are vetted by the site and checked for credit-worthiness, county court judgments, public and employers' liability insurance, and must agree to random site checks. They are also bound by a code of practice. No customer feedback. **GHI VERDICT** While the checks it claims to do are useful, you'll still need to get references and verify qualifications and experience before employing traders. Site appears to have a decent complaints procedure. Traders can vet customers via a credit check.

### [www.findabuilder.co.uk](http://www.findabuilder.co.uk)

You search a database of traders who have been vetted by the reputable FMB. For the lowest membership level, firms must have passed credit checks, been trading for a year, give six references, be insured and sign a code of practice.

**GHI VERDICT** No customer feedback, but it's easy to search for local, approved builders.

### [www.checkatrade.co.uk](http://www.checkatrade.co.uk)

You search a database for traders by postcode or company and view previous customer feedback. Website checks firms' references, qualifications and complaints made to Trading Standards. Traders must pledge to follow the site's standard.

**GHI VERDICT** Clear website, good vetting process, easy for customers to leave feedback.

### [www.trustatradet.com](http://www.trustatradet.com)

You search a database and view feedback on registered traders.

To join, traders need proof of insurance, qualifications and any trade organisation membership, and must give references and sign a code of conduct.

**GHI VERDICT** Clear and easy to search. Only 10 traders of the same type can join in each area, so the choice may be limited. □

**'It only takes 10 minutes to set up an "approved trader" website'**

## YOUR 60-SECOND REMINDER

■ More than 65,000 consumers complained about shoddy tradesmen last year\*\*.

■ Falling victim to cowboys/tradesmen costs homeowners £1,592 on average\*\*.

■ Make sure you do your homework. Spend a fair amount of time getting personal recommendations and checking credentials and references.

■ Don't rely on commercial comparison websites to do the legwork for you.

**IF YOU'RE SERIOUS** about home improvements, get The BCIS Property Makeover Price Guide\* for costs relating to all major property problems, alterations and extensions (£17.99 from [www.ricsbooks.com](http://www.ricsbooks.com))

## KEEP YOUR HEAD WHEN HIRING

■ Get at least three quotes before making your decision. Don't just opt for the cheapest. Time spent now could save you money and hassle in the long run.

■ Get quotations in writing with timescales and what's included in the price, taking into account VAT.

■ Have a contract. You can download one for free from the Federation of Master Builders' site [www.findabuilder.co.uk](http://www.findabuilder.co.uk). The trader should give you details about your seven-day cancellation rights. If they don't, they're breaking the law.

■ Never pay in full for a job up front. Make part payments at key stages, using a credit card (if the job is over £100) for additional consumer protection.

## IF THINGS GO WRONG

■ Sometimes a meeting with the boss/site foreman to clarify your instructions is all that's needed to get the job back on track.

■ If you can't resolve the problem, find out what dispute-resolution procedures are open to you (via membership of trade associations or commercial websites). It's far better to involve a friendly mediator than rush to court.

■ Contact Consumer Direct for advice on what your rights are.