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How to Choose a Solar Installer



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Courtesy U.S. Army Environmental Command

Installing a solar PV system on your roof requires some fairly advanced electrical, structural, and renewable energy knowledge, so you don't want to play around by hiring someone who is less than qualified to do the job. For that reason, it's a good idea to look for certain technical qualifications,

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experience, and professional astuteness when seeking out a solar installer for your home.

Solar Contractor Licensing and Certification

Start by looking into the credentials of your potential solar installer. Your state may or may not have a policy in place for mandatory licensing of solar installers in your region, but if they do, definitely look for a contractor with the proper licensing requirements. The national **Database of State Incentives for Renewables & Efficiency** (DSIRE) maintains a list of state rules, regulations, and policies that make it simple for you to determine what licensing regulations are available in your area.

Where licensing requirements are lacking, look for a solar installer with an advanced renewable energy certificate. For this, the **North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners** (NABCEP) is your best bet as it provides a nationally-recognized voluntary certification program for PV technical sales professionals, PV installers, and solar thermal installers, and has a Code of Ethics to which each NABCEP professional must adhere. As a consumer, the NABCEP certification will help you differentiate those installers who are specifically trained for installing solar photovoltaics and those who are not. Ecovian's solar contractor database includes many NABCEP certified professionals.

In addition to these credentials, you may also want to look for a contractor with verifiable experience and knowledge in roofing, green buildings, and the like. Also ensure they are bonded, insured, and in good standing with the Better Business Bureau (BBB), all permitting authorities, and local utilities.

Estimate Questions for Your Solar Installation

The information given to you in a quote can also tell you a lot about what it will be like to work with a given solar contractor. Ask yourself the following questions as you review their quotation:

Is ongoing service included? Choose a contractor who will provide ongoing maintenance, cleaning services, repairs, and replacements.

Is there an uptime guarantee in the service warranty? This should be as close to 100% of the time as possible.

Does the price cover all parts, installation, and grid hook-up? Though this is not required, you'll want to know what additional costs you'll incur if these are not included.

Do you have to pay for everything up front? You should always ensure there is at least 10% to

20% held in retainer until the system is up and running.

What is the estimated return on investment (ROI)? The average ROI on a solar PV system can range significantly from 5 to 15 years depending on current and future energy prices, incentives and rebates available, interest rates on loans, and sale price for your home. Whether the ROI makes a solar system a good investment will depend on your particular financial goals.

Is a yield tracking and monitoring system included? This will allow you to independently evaluate how much energy your system is producing and when problems arise.

Solar Equipment Questions

Your solar equipment will be with you for 25 years or more, so you want to ensure you get the highest-performing, most durable, and reliable solar equipment you can. As such, you'll want to ask your potential installer questions about the quality of the solar equipment they are recommending for you:

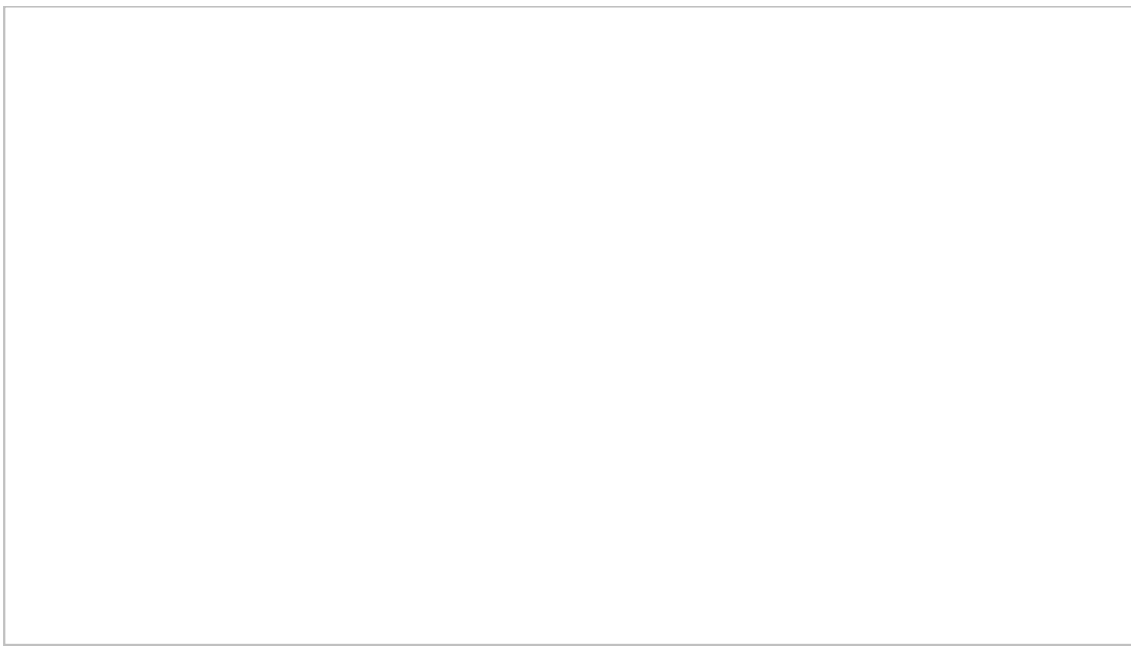
Are there several manufacturer and model options from which to choose? Research each component to ensure they meet industry standards and to evaluate their efficiency compared to other similar products.

Do the main components each come with a warranty? Average warranty lengths: solar modules – 25 years, inverters – 5 to 10 years, racking – 10 years, installation – 10 years, and the balance of system (most of the remaining components) – 10 years.

Does the quote include yearly performance estimates? Solar irradiation data should originate from professional modeling software and not from back-of-the-napkin ad hoc calculations. A quote might read something like: "In Year 20, these crystalline panels will produce 80% of the energy they produced in Year One with a 1% degradation in efficiency per year for the life of the panels."

Is there a model or drawing of the proposed solar system? It should include layout of all equipment, surface area covered, tilt required, and any structural changes needed to fit the PV panels to your rooftop.

Solar Installer Reference Questions



Courtesy CoCreatr

Next, check on the installer's references from previous clients by asking them the following questions:

Did the installation go smoothly? Was it completed on time and within budget?

How is the company's customer service? Were technicians and phone personnel polite and easy to deal with?

Was the company able to resolve any problems quickly and without hassle? This may indicate how they'll solve any problems you'll face.

Has the company honored their warranty agreements? Warranties are useless if they are not honored, so be sure you talk to references who have been with the company at least 10 years (if possible)

There are a lot of issues to cover when considering what company to hire for your solar PV installation, but by doing your homework, you're more likely to have a hiccup-free, pleasurable installation and a long, happy relationship with your solar equipment. Now that you have a good idea of what to look for in a solar installer, check out Ecovian's directory of solar installers to find the perfect contractor in your area.

For more information

www.dsireusa.org Database of State Incentives for Renewables & Efficiency (DSIRE)

www.nabcep.org North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners (NABCEP)

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