

# Mike Holmes: Get on the horn and gab to green producers



Go green but research first.

Mike Dunphy for Canwest News Service

**Mike Holmes, Canwest News Service** · Friday, May 21, 2010

The green building industry is moving so fast, with technology and products being introduced and improved all the time. It's really hard for homeowners — and even for contractors — to keep up.

We want to do the right thing in terms of helping the environment by making greener and more energy-efficient choices. And, with the financial incentives to build green, everyone is getting on the bandwagon.

For contractors, it's a chance to make money — and there's nothing wrong with that, if they are qualified to do the work. But, when opportunists just see the chance to make a buck, without knowing what they are doing and how it all ties together — that's where trouble starts.

A house is a system — everything works together. Any change you make to one part will affect another. So, if you decide to upgrade all your windows to low-e triple glazed, you'll definitely save money on heat loss/gain. But you may find you now have more humidity building up inside, and your indoor air quality worsens. So you have to also get an HRV (heat recovery ventilator) because your green improvements mean you no longer have air leakage that used to help vent out the moist air. Your contractor should anticipate this kind of problem.

In my experience, consumers are cost-conscious, but not necessarily value conscious. They still go into a dream renovation with a tight budget and expect, or hope blindly, to have it all. New technology and products cost more than conventional products, but they last longer and they save you money over time. You can't go by price alone and if you and/or your contractor only consider price, you may be asking for trouble.

Your contractor may be trying to save you money on the project, and substitute products that aren't equal. For example, look at spray foam. Closed-cell and open-cell spray foam insulation aren't the same things, there is a significant performance difference between them. Yes, closed-cell is more expensive, but it's not just a matter of simple cost savings.

Your green contractor has to have solid product knowledge and needs to be familiar with how a new product needs to be used. Take BluWood, for example: You've got to spray the solution on every cut end as you work, otherwise the product isn't effective. I can hear you now: Am I supposed to know all about products myself? That's what I've hired a professional contractor for!

As a homeowner, you can ask the manufacturer of the products you are using on your house to come to your site and verify the

installation of your new green products. Not every manufacturer will do it, but they can review and verify the quality of the install and ensure it meets warranty standards. You can also contact green organizations and ask them to do a peer review. That will give you some confidence that your project is going the way you want it to.

For me, it comes down to the question of who's teaching green building in our schools. In my opinion, not enough is being taught. The school year is full with teaching the basics, and that means teaching minimum code. Why? Because that's what's being built today. If the grads want to have a job when they finish school, they've got to be able to walk on to a building site and know what the production builders today are doing.

Minimum code isn't green.

If new tradespeople don't learn at school, they sure aren't going to learn how to go beyond minimum code and build greener on the job site of a production builder. So where does that leave them — and you, the homeowner — who wants to do the right thing in terms of building sustainably?

They have to learn on their own — reading, researching, joining green building societies — which makes me ask whether they are qualified to call themselves green experts.

How do you know if you are hiring the right contractor for your green reno? What accreditation is there? In many situations there are organizations like the GeoExchange Coalition, Solar Industries Association or Green Roofs for Healthy Cities — but these aren't governing bodies. They are professional groups that exist to share ideas and provide learning and development of their industries, or work as lobby groups to influence government policy. Membership is no guarantee of excellence.

That means you need to still ask questions, check references, talk to past clients, see the work. And this is key: Even if you don't feel confident that you know what you're looking at, at least you are speaking to a former client. Are they happy? Was the work done on time and on budget? Did they get what they paid for?

It always costs more to do the job over again. And — as far as green building goes, it will cost you much more than you save in rebates and tax breaks.

Homeowners really want to take advantage of the incentives that are available to go green. And the demand for contractors to do green renos is both an opportunity and a curse. The building industry benefits, but there's not enough good, qualified guys to go around. And that, in my experience, leads to trouble. Some homeowner is going to get stuck holding the short straw, and will hire a contractor who's not going to be qualified to do the job.

In my world, it always comes back to my big three tips: slow down, educate yourself and ask questions before hiring the right contractor.

• Catch Mike in his brand-new series, *Holmes Inspection*, airing Thursdays at 8 p.m. on HGTV. For more information, visit [hgtv.ca](http://hgtv.ca). Do you have a question about home renovations? Email [mike@makeitright.ca](mailto:mike@makeitright.ca).

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