GOING SOLAR

How to find the right solar installer for your home
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The choice you make for home solar products and installation is something you get to (or have to) live with for decades. Many solar installation companies out there offer low-priced solar products and installations. But the old adage you get what you pay for couldn’t be truer than when it comes to solar products—and installation partners.

This guide will help you choose the right solar installation company. One that can customize a solar system to match your needs, with high-quality solar products, and payment options that meet your budget. When you meet with solar companies, here are some questions to ask with advice on evaluating the answers.

PART 1: EXPERIENCE

PART 2: EQUIPMENT

PART 3: PAYMENT

PART 4: RED FLAGS
Experience

Hire a solar installer who knows what solar works best in your specific geographic region. There is a reason you wouldn't hire a contractor in Arizona to work on your house in New York—the same is true for solar installations.
PART 1: EXPERIENCE

How much experience does your crew have installing in my area?

Weather and sunlight vary from region to region, so you want to hire an installer who can design a system that works well in your climate. Plus, local experience is important because the solar installer will likely be more familiar with local building and electrical codes. This is a huge asset because installing solar is an electrical construction project, which requires following local city codes and obtaining the proper permits. If your installer has a strong relationship with the local permitting offices and inspectors, it can help your installation go smoothly, avoiding potential hold-ups caused by changes in local codes or utility requirements.

QUICK TIP

Local installers are likely more familiar with local building and electrical codes.
To save costs, some companies have template designs and might not be able to customize a solar system specifically for your home. So rather than relying on a template approach, look for a company who works with the specifics of your home and roof—what direction it faces, what it’s made of and if it’s shaded. A solar system designed for your roof’s conditions will maximize your system’s performance, and that’s exactly what you want.
PART 1: EXPERIENCE

What type of licenses, certifications and credentials does your crew have?

Any solar company worth working with will be licensed and bonded, and this information will be easy to track down. The North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners (NABCEP) has a PV Installation Professional certification program that holds industry professionals to the highest standards. Ask if anyone on staff has this certification and if they'll be involved in your project. SunPower offers a special training and certification program for professionals installing their products.

It’s also a big plus if the solar company has a licensed electrician and other certified tradesmen on staff, so also ask if licensed technicians will be installing your panels. Solar is relatively new technology, and installing it requires knowledge of other building trades. A company that has professionals with additional expertise, like roofing, means they have the ability to provide well-rounded service for your installation.

QUICK TIP

Experience with other building trades, like roofing, can make it easier to install solar.
Equipment

There are big differences in how solar equipment is designed and manufactured. As a baseline, expect to install solar that performs as promised and under warranty for the next 25 years. Anything less is not a good use of your time or money.
PART 2: EQUIPMENT

What brand(s) of equipment will be installed on my roof?

Your solar system is going to be up on your roof for a long time, and you deserve to know the brand name of the company that made it. Most solar companies use multiple brands of solar panels, inverters, racking systems, and other components, and they pick the brand for your home based on the inventory they have in their warehouse on the day of your installation. All of these products were designed to function to generic specifications and are made by different manufacturers. This leads to more performance variables, potential complications and complexities with warranties. It can also lead to a disjointed design aesthetic.

There are solar systems available that are designed and engineered by a single company to work together. For example, SunPower Equinox™ is a total home solar solution by SunPower that works together as an integrated system under one comprehensive warranty.

QUICK TIP

There are solar systems available that are designed and engineered by one company.
At first glance, all warranties may appear the same, but it’s important to read the fine print. For starters, if you expect your system to last 25 years (which you should) then the warranty should last that long, too.

You also want a warranty that covers your entire system—not just the panels. And it’s beneficial if all your equipment is under warranty from the same company. If a solar system is built with components and technology from different manufacturers, it can be challenging to isolate who is responsible, and therefore, who will provide recompense if something goes wrong.

SunPower offers a Complete Confidence Warranty, the only warranty to cover your entire system. There is no need for receipts, proof of purchase or written claims. The warranty provides full coverage for quality of product and solar power produced. Plus, if you experience issues with your system within 25 years (10 years for monitoring hardware and software), SunPower will repair, replace and reimburse.

**QUICK TIP**

If a solar system is built with parts from different manufacturers, it can be hard to isolate who is responsible if something goes wrong.
PART 2: EQUIPMENT

What’s the efficiency, durability and performance of your panels?

When a solar installer refers to panel efficiency, they are talking about a term that directly translates to your energy savings. The higher the efficiency rating, the better the panel is at producing energy, resulting in more electricity generated to offset your utility bill and more savings in your wallet.

Durability ratings quantify how well a panel will hold up on your roof over time. The higher the durability ratings, the longer the solar panel is going to last. Your roof can be a pretty tough place and you want to invest in panels that can withstand wear and tear for at least 25 years.

Performance refers to how much energy the panel is producing, from day one throughout its lifespan. Every solar panel produces less energy over time, but not at the same rate. Some panels degrade quickly, producing far less energy at year 10 than year one. Other panels degrade more slowly, maintaining high performance rates throughout their entire lifespan—25 years or longer.

Panels with high efficiency, durability, and performance ratings are going to generate the most energy for the longest amount of time. Panels that come out on top for all of these ratings are not the least expensive in terms of upfront costs; however, when you calculate the total lifetime value of these solar panels, you will quickly see why the investment is well worth it.
Home solar is an investment that can offer decades of stable returns. Your installation partner should prepare you for purchase with financing options and a forecast of your near and long-term energy savings.
How you’ll pay for your solar system should be as custom-fit as your system. Quality solar companies will offer several options for payment, including cash purchases, loans and leasing (where available). Loans are becoming a very popular way to pay for a solar system, with options to finance for up to 20 years and highly competitive interest rates.

There are $0-down options* for leasing and loans, which many people find beneficial to minimize the immediate impact that solar has on their budgets. Depending on what financial institution you work with, there are also options to add solar to a home mortgage, refinancing or other financial products for home improvement.

*For qualified customers.

**QUICK TIP**

Quality solar companies will offer several options for payment, including cash, loans and leasing.
You will have your solar for decades to come, so you want to know that you’ll be working with a reputable and stable financial institution. The solar company should be transparent about who is financing or underwriting your loan or lease. Look for a financial company with experience financing solar and an understanding of the industry. As with any lease or loan, you’ll want to secure low interest rates and favorable terms for the duration of your agreement.
All solar companies should provide you with a detailed proposal that includes how much you can expect to save on energy with the solar system they’re suggesting. This information comes from analyzing your energy use for the last year and the size of installation, while factoring in available federal and local incentives.

All of these factors contribute to the projections for your near and longer-term savings potential with solar. To ensure you are getting the accurate estimates, be sure to ask potential solar partners to explain how much you’ll save with your solar system in 5, 10 and 20 years down the line. This is the only way you can accurately set your financial expectations.

QUICK TIP

Be sure to ask potential solar partners how much you’ll save with your system in 5, 10 and 20 years.
Unfortunately, there is a lot of misinformation out there about home solar, and as a first-time customer, you don’t know what you don’t know. Think twice about solar companies that spread the following—they may not have your best interest in mind.
From performance to product lifespan to price, solar panels are very different. You have a right to know what solar products will be installed on your roof, and beyond that, your solar installation partner should be asking for your input during this process versus dictating what you will get.

The installation company should be able to provide technical specifications on solar panel efficiency, degradation rate and durability ratings. You should be suspicious if they try to skirt the issue or are hesitant to provide this information. Durability, efficiency, degradation rates and wattage are all indicators of system performance, which will determine the amount of energy your panels will produce today and well into the future.

**PART 4: RED FLAGS**

“All solar panels are the same.”

**QUICK TIP**

Your solar installation partner should be asking for your input when choosing your solar system products.
Ambiguity around warranty coverage

The installation company should be transparent about the warranties of each piece of equipment including the panels, mounting system, inverters and the service provided post-installation. It’s also fair to ask the installation company what happens if they no longer do business in the area and if that’s happened before.

**QUICK TIP**

Ask the solar installation company what happens if you experience an issue and they no longer do business in the area.
Pushing one kind of financing

Many solar companies encourage buyers to use their solar financing packages since income from the financing is an important part of their business model. If the solar company is pushing one kind of financing over another and not considering what’s best for your budget, you might want to walk away (or at least put on the brakes). It’s possible the company has a motive for suggesting a specific financing track. Like getting a car loan or mortgage, you want to get several quotes to ensure you get the best financing rates.

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