

Beware of Chimney Scams

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It seems to be an unfortunate fact of life that if there is a way to make money, some people will try to do it dishonestly. As a homeowner, you certainly realize that scams involving home improvement are a perennial problem.

Chimneys provide a "golden" opportunity for dishonest people who attempt to take advantage of the trust of others, since most people know little about them and the inside of a chimney is hidden from view.

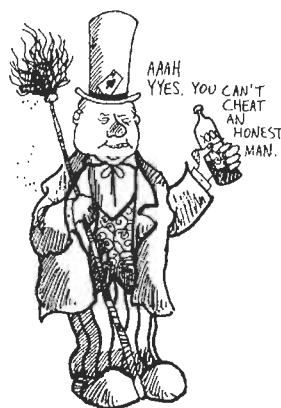
Scammers use innumerable ploys, but their techniques often have several things in common. They usually begin with an offer of a low cost inspection or sweeping. When the company arrives for the job, they claim to discover problems that urgently require repair. They may pressure the homeowner, sometimes with scare tactics, to hire them to do the work immediately. Then the company may "do no work at all, inferior work or unnecessary work," warns County Executive Andy Spano of Westchester County, NY.

Scammers' favorite targets are senior citizens, but they'll go after anyone.

A case involving an elderly woman in Guttenberg, New Jersey is a textbook example.

After the woman accepted a telephone offer to have her chimney cleaned for \$35, the chimney sweeps told her the chimney was badly damaged and needed repair for a cost of \$1,000. When she became upset and told them she didn't know what to do, they threatened to have the utility company shut off her gas, during a cold spell in February, if she did not immediately authorize the work.

"Be wary of sales lines such as: 'we will be in your neighborhood,' 'a discount is offered for seniors and veterans,' or 'if we don't inspect your chimney, you may be in danger,' says Elaine Price, director of the Westchester County (NY) Department of Consumer Protection. "Don't allow [them] to convince you to act without time to make an informed decision."



This fellow looks pretty unsavory, but you can't always tell just by looking who's honest and competent and who is bad news. When it comes to chimney services and other home maintenance or home improvement work, don't get stung by a smooth operator out to take your money and run! There ARE ways to check credentials and local reputation.

Many Chimneys Do Need Work

A home improvement scammer may actually be correct in pointing out the advisability of repairing or relining a chimney.

Chimneys may deteriorate from the inside due to the effects of use, and from the outside due to the effects of weather. Additionally, many professional chimney



Fire investigators report that few chimneys in North America are built to code and many are in a state of disrepair.

sweeps say that in their daily rounds they rarely encounter a chimney that has been constructed according to code. Liners are frequently missing. Clearances to combustibles such as wood framing are often inadequate.

How Do I Find a Capable Chimney Professional?

Because proper chimney maintenance can help protect people from the dangers of house fires and carbon monoxide poisonings, it is important to choose your chimney professional wisely. Before you hire a chimney sweep, find out whether chimney sweeps are required to have a license in the community where you live. If they do, then your first step is to verify that any companies you're considering have valid licenses.

Ask around in your community for a chimney sweep with a good reputation. A well-earned good reputation is the public's "seal of approval."

Professional chimney service specialists also demonstrate their competence through certification by the Chimney Safety Institute of America (CSIA), the National Fireplace Institute (for installers of hearth appliances), the Wood Energy Technology Transfer program in Canada, and some state chimney sweep organizations.

Technicians who have passed the CSIA Certified Chimney Sweep® exam carry a laminated identification badge. If you are unfamiliar with the company you are hiring, it may be wise to ask to see the technician's badge. Unfortunately, false claims of certification are a fairly common complaint within the chimney service profession. A list of CSIA Certified Chimney Sweeps is available at www.csia.org.

If a chimney sweep you have carefully screened and then hired says your chimney system needs serious attention, it is probably true. You may want to get a second opinion, but don't ignore the situation.