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Communication

Unintended Consequences of Too Much Communication

Owners are Getting Accustomed to the PIC's, ICU's, NOIC's, Budget Packages, AGM Notices, Etc., and are Quickly Becoming Desensitized

It always amazes me when I attend Annual General Meetings to hear the board report start with a statement that the board is happy with the new level of communication and then the first comment from owners under New Business is "You never tell us anything."

I think it is this confusion, that in part, led to the current regulations requiring information certificates. Owners wanted more information; hello Periodic Information Certificate (PIC), Information Certificate Update (ICU) and New Owner Information Certificate (NOIC). Add this to the budget package, AGM Pre-notice and AGM package and then pepper it with the many notices of fire alarm inspections, water shut downs and any other political or operational information that needs to be disseminated to the owners and residents and you end up with a steady stream of "official" condominium communication. One might even say a never ending barrage of communication. Now let's look to the marketing industry to see if we can find any parallels. The neighborhood flyers that come in the mail, the endless real estate notices, penny saver, fast food coupons and on and on. What do the majority of people do with this relentless bombardment of paper? Ignore and toss! People have be-



come desensitized to the myriad of advertising that attacks them every day. After all, doesn't our friend Google offer all we need to do our shopping? Costco, Amazon, EBay are all a click away so who needs paper?

Back to our condominium world. We have only mentioned seven mandatory communication notices and we can assume one fire notice and perhaps three or four other operational notices per year. Owners are getting accustomed to the PIC's,

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMIE BENNETT

ICU's and other packages and are quickly becoming desensitized to anything condo. Out of this barrage of communication, I would suggest that most important to most owners and residents would be the budget package: "How much more will I have to pay?"

In the governments haste to satisfy the loudest of the panelists consulted during the drafting stage of the regulations, the unanticipated consequence of too much communication seems to have been overlooked. To add more apathy to this desensitization, the better things seem to be moving along in the life of a condominium community, the less likely residents and owners are to read this steady and unrelenting onslaught of communication.

Let's agree that the PIC's are a good thing because they inform owners on the risks associated with current court actions and changes to insurance that could/will affect the cost of living or curb appeal of ones real estate investment. We could even argue that the ICU and the triggers for issuing an ICU have some merit, but isn't the NOIC a bit of overkill? We have to look at this "improved" communication holistically, in conjunction with the other mandated communication that is sent to owners, to fully understand why this desensitizing is taking root.

We also need to look at what people are gleaned from this communication overload. The director disclosure is a great tool for ensuring that directors declare any conflict and yet owners are not seeing this as critical data, instead they simply want to know if the candidate is a resident owner, something that a simple rule or by-law could look after.

While we are talking about communication, we should look at the suicide clause for directors that was placed into one of the communication tools. The ability for owners to request additional materials or agenda items for the AGM and the ability for directors not to agree (unless requisitioned) must surely be a clause designed to wear out the weak on the board. Owners ask and the board says no, without explanation: a perfect recipe for a requisition to change to the board. Huh? Who thought of this one?



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Could a condominium be well served if the only mandated communication was the director disclosure and the Information Certificate Update? Of course the AGM and budget packages must remain. The ICU would simply inform owners of changes as they occur...full stop! This starts to reduce the number of communication notices leaving only the critical notices for construction, fire alarms, elevator shut downs etc.. In other words, owners and residents would soon learn that most of the communication that comes their way will impact them on a daily basis and therefore should be scanned at a minimum.

Does the average owner take any action knowing that some legal action has been filed, the insurance company has been notified and has confirmed they will cover the cost of defense? With the inclusion of so many mandated communications, the risk of conflicting statements becomes exacerbated. The ICU notes that a claim is outstanding against the corporation, the Status Certificate will need to be updated to show this, the next PIC will have to be issued with this new information, can details even be discussed if the case has

not yet gone to court....was this a make work project?

It's hard to change legislation once it's entrenched operationally and processes have been developed to comply, which only highlights that the quality of the message needs professional attention. This could include notice boards with journalistic input into how the message looks and reads, short and concise cover letters or executive summaries of a package (for those inclined to simply ignore and toss).

No matter how a condominium chooses to address communication, it still needs some level of professional attention. What was once a simple request to "post a notice" is now so much more. It is yet another layer of communication to a desensitized audience who is more likely to ignore the content than to read it. An audience who sees the notice or communication as yet one more bullet in the communication gun aimed directly at them.

So what's the take away, how does a board start to sensitize owners to communications? How do you force "someone else" to read something that "you" think is important? I only wish I had the answer. I have spent many years managing floods, changes of directors, resident complaints, legal claims, maintenance repairs, contract management, staff supervision, regulatory mandates and yet I can't remember ever sitting with a board to develop a comprehensive communication strategy. This may not have been needed in the past but I assure you things are different today and a new skill set is required, one that I and most of my peers were never trained on.

This condominium management industry in Ontario grew from a needs base almost 54 years ago. It grew from a cottage industry business to what it is today, but our mindset is still at the cottage. We have avoided change, resisted formal protocols for volunteer boards and resisted the "business" side of managing a community. We have grown up, with grown up needs and new skills, perhaps the largest consequence of too much communication will be the cost of yet another expert supporting the condominium community. This new consumer protection is getting pretty expensive! **CV**