



So you want to start a community blog

Condo boards in Ontario are currently wading through an alphabet soup of new “information certificates.” PICs, which is short for periodic information certificates, require boards to regularly communicate to owners about key aspects of the affairs of their corporation, such as its financial status.

The information certificates, established by recent legislative reforms, arose out of a review of Ontario's condo laws, which identified a need to improve communication in condo communities. PICs and their counterparts establish a minimum standard of what boards need to communicate to owners and when.

But some directors are finding there are benefits to communicating more information, more often. Andreea Birloncea, president of a Toronto-area condo board, is one such director. *CondoBusiness* recently spoke with Birloncea via email about the blog she started in her community.

When did you start the blog? Why?

It evolved from the creation and launch of our website, www.EmeraldCityOne.com. At first, the website was a tool for items such as bookings, corporation documents such as the declaration and bylaws, registration forms, contact information, etc. We then listened to feedback from residents, and they all wanted more communication. I figured

that the best way to let everyone know what was happening was not with short notices in the elevators, but by creating a blog that informs, educates, and involves residents.

The blogging began on Jan. 5, 2016, and so far has 119 posts. The blog now gets more than a thousand hits per month, so we're happy to see that residents (and others!) are regularly checking in!

I've always believed that information and transparency can help people understand why decisions have been made, and once residents understand our reasons and/or requests, they are more likely to happily and positively be a part of our community.

It's also a way for us to reassure residents that we're listening to them. Every time we've made a decision that enough residents have passionately contested, we've been enthusiastic about doing further research, polling residents, and explaining to them why we've come to the decision in the end.

Ultimately, it's a great way to be heard and make sure that residents also feel heard!

What's involved: Who posts? How often? About what?

Everyone posts! Primarily, the blog has been my responsibility and I've posted the most; however, I've often asked staff and contractors to help me out with content when I feel that it would be better coming directly from them. Posts are always written by whomever I consider to be the most knowledgeable on the subject. Most often, my fellow authors are my superintendents, management staff, and security supervisor.

We try to keep the blog fresh by posting at least every couple of weeks, but really it's on an as-needed schedule — sometimes it's more often and sometimes things are pretty quiet around here!

The content of the posts varies a lot; some are necessary posts (for example, our most recent post about people abandoning pets on the property), some are fun posts (such as recipes, local spa discounts and social committee events), and some are follow-up posts or items that we feel our community could use a reminder of.



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What has your experience been like? Has the blog helped achieve what you intended it to?

My experience has been unbelievably positive so far.

Maintaining the blog is a huge investment of my time as I try to be as thorough and regular as possible with posts, but it is also highly rewarding when I see residents who are happy.

Being a director is often considered to be a thankless job, but I feel like my involvement in the community, website, and especially the blog have made being a director very

pleasant and rewarding. It's incredibly re-energizing and fulfilling when I'm in the elevator with a neighbour and they thank me for increasing the communication, or discuss the website and the issues that recent blog posts have tackled.

It's especially nice to see that my extra involvement has caused such a ripple-effect and inspired so many residents to also get more involved and become aware of their home and community, and I really do love that I have gotten to know so many of my neighbours in the process. Living in a big

condo can be ironically lonely, but in our condo, residents have really started to come together as a community thanks to the fact that they feel heard and respected, which has really changed the atmosphere to a truly positive one.

Furthermore, the content has been educational for so many, and we've started to see a decline in the issues we've experienced (such as improper waste disposal).

Also, because we discuss so many topics online, it keeps our AGMs shorter and more positive. AGMs are notorious for being the one and only opportunity for residents to "rant" at boards, but I believe that through our website and blog (and general willingness to be open and friendly), our AGMs no longer inspire fear in our hearts. Rather, it's an opportunity for us to listen to concerns that residents have — concerns that are usually presented very nicely and fairly — and it often also serves as inspiration for future blog posts!

All in all, I definitely believe that the blog has helped achieve what I intended it to — and more! I think it's one of the most important tools that we have in our community, and I value it tremendously.

What advice would you give to other boards considering starting a blog in their community?

Starting and regularly maintaining a blog is a commitment. On the one hand, it takes time, and that can sometimes be a challenge for someone who is already volunteering a lot of personal time to be on their board of directors. On the other hand, publishing a blog and being transparent about issues via posts also saves time, because directors will be getting fewer emails and/or complaints about issues, especially around AGM time. It's also a great method for making sure that suite owners and residents feel heard, and also feel like a part of their community.

I especially encourage boards to not just publish functional posts, but also posts that involve their residents (polls, giveaways, events, etc.). No one wants to read a "dry" blog — you've got to give it some juice!

At first, boards may not see a huge difference, but they shouldn't let that become discouraging! Little by little, residents will notice and they will appreciate all of the efforts made to inform, educate, and communicate. □

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