

CAPTIJN: Another missed opportunity -- Tarion's annual public meeting

Author of the article:

[Barbara Captijn](#)

Published Jul 16, 2022 •



Tarion is the government agency charged with providing financial backing when new home builders don't honour their warranties.

The importance of consumers to any business came out loud and clear last week with the massive outage of Rogers internet services for millions of Canadians. Even the federal regulator called the blackout unacceptable, and urged big providers to set up pro-active safeguards to protect consumers.

But how do we as consumers make our voices heard and properly understood by senior management of large corporations? One way is to attend their annual public meetings, whose purpose is partly to solicit feedback from the public and enable interactions with senior management.

That is, of course, if the senior executives show up.

A case in point is the Tarion annual public meeting I attended this week. I'll call it a missed opportunity. Tarion is the government agency charged with providing financial backing when new home builders don't honour their warranties.

I've attended six of these annual public meetings since 2013.

This meeting was a chance for Tarion, after two scathing independent reports on its problems, to show consumers if it has made measurable progress in consumer protection.

That isn't what happened. The board members were not present, and were not introduced even virtually to the public. The internal Ombudsperson was not there, as was the case in previous years; ditto for the so-called "Consumer Advisory Council" which is supposed to advise the board on consumer issues.

Many consumers took the time to attend this meeting at their own cost, on a summer's evening when they had other things to attend to, but some of the executives paid to do these jobs didn't even bother to show. This was a chance to personally interact and gather information about the consumer experience with Tarion's services.

Oddly, Tarion hired an external moderator who said he had no ties with or knowledge of Tarion. Why distance yourself from your customers? One of Tarion's VPs or CEO should have conducted the meeting, to show at least some connection with the public or empathy with the concerns raised.

The VP Finance delivered a pre-recorded message on a video screen, and was not available to answer questions afterward.

Consumers were told they could only raise questions on general policy issues, nothing related to their own issues with construction defects. Why is this a no-go topic? That's what homeowners care about most. Few people have the time or interest to attend meetings on a lovely summer's evening to talk policy. Very few attend.

Some of the questions raised by consumers were: Why does Tarion not allow consumers to record inspections in their own homes, and why do they use non-disclosure agreements to silence homeowners? Others focused on cancellations of pre-construction projects, the internal ombudsperson's role, why Tarion is pushing consumers to accept cash settlements instead of fixing defects, concerns about the inaccuracy of the Builder Directory, and questions about Tarion's financials and the board Chair's compensation.

The four executives on the panel at the front of the room have not changed: all four are 10-year veterans of the organization. So this is a hard sell as a new and improved Tarion. What's changed in the corporate culture?

Tarion had the chance to show tangible measures it may have taken to improve consumer protection. Where are they? Saying Tarion is "consumer-centric" or overhauled isn't convincing. Give us the proof in measurable terms. Let consumers speak openly. Great leaders know you can learn a lot from dissatisfied customers. But you have to engage.

At the very minimum, Tarion should allow consumers to ask questions on their individual files if they've tried other avenues without success, the CEO should chair the meeting, there should be timely confirmations sent to attendees, and a full hour allowed for questions or consumer statements. It should be mandatory for all board members and consumer committee members to attend. No more canned, pre-recorded speeches, especially if the speaker isn't there to answer questions about what's been said. Tarion has \$750+ million in investments, and the means to do all of the above, and much more.

There should be real consumer advocates on Tarion's board, people who understand the consumer experience with poorly-built new homes. A lawyer and a former industry lobbyist are not too convincing as consumer advocates.

The PC government trumpeted a complete overhaul of broken Tarion. But it seems some of those who had the job to sell this to the public didn't even bother to show up. The more things don't change, the more they remain the same.

— *Barbara Captijn is a Consumer Advocate*