

PRISM AWARD SUBMISSION

AGENCY: BYDESIGN COMMUNICATIONS
CATEGORY: EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATIONS
CLIENT: SPARK SCHOOLS
CAMPAIGN: LEARNING IN LOCKDOWN



March 2020 hit and schooling as we knew it changed forever. Masks, vizors, no parents on school grounds. Classes were sanitised. Kids were sanitised. Schooling encourages kids to think outside the box...but now they were forced to stay inside their block.

The change would be immense for teachers, parents, and kids alike.

As a disruptor to the blended learning approach in South Africa, SPARK Schools was ready for learning in lockdown. Being ready is one thing - non-payment by parents, teacher unrest, fake news, and mis-trust amongst employees threatened SPARK Schools.





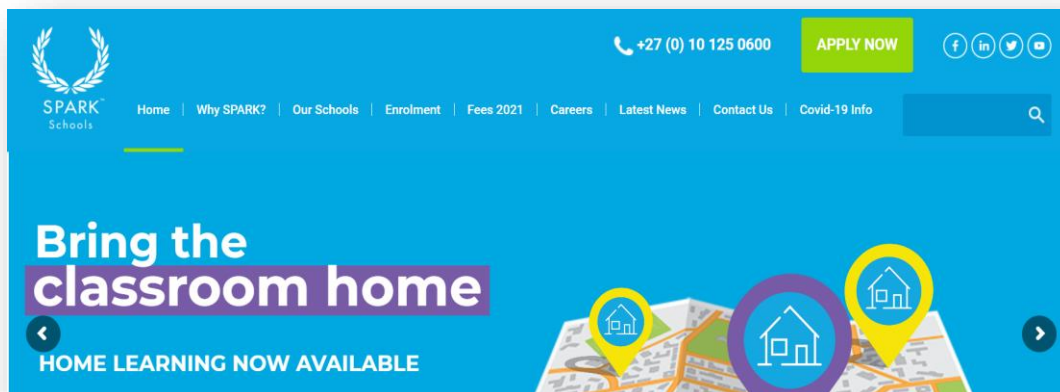
STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Beginning of 2020, SPARK Schools had 21 schools and 1202 employees across South Africa. Lockdown in March 2020, unearthed several risks to SPARK's sustainability.

- Financial pressure – some parents lost their source of income, and others simply refused to pay full school fees
- A burgeoning debtor's book - salary cuts, retrenchments and the move to manage prudently by closing three schools in December 2020
- Transition to online learning – getting infrastructure to teachers quickly for home learning – access to devices, data, dealing with power outages.
- Bad news spreads like wildfire. SPARK Schools was facing a barrage of fake news and misinformation spurred by panic and distrust amongst parents and teachers.



VS





RESEARCH

Our research methodology included internal SPARK Schools Change Management reports, Net Promoter Scores, a deep dive into conversations on SPARK Schools Facebook parent groups as well as independent research.

- **The SPARK Change Management Committee and NPS survey** (amongst Principals and school staff) indicated that:
 - At the beginning of April 2020, more than 63% of staff members lacked understanding of how the Temporary Employer / Employee Relief Scheme (TERS) financial support programme worked.
 - A further employee survey in May 2020 showed:
 - The lack of understanding was adding to a trust deficit in believing SPARK Schools was acting in the best interest of employees.
 - 52% of teachers felt they lacked the infrastructure to do their job properly (data connectivity to conduct online classes)
 - Anecdotal feedback amongst school leaders indicated a hesitancy to share information with staff members, as often this information was shared/'leaked' into private WhatsApp groups and added to the spread of fake news.
- **The Edelman Trust Barometer, Reuters Institute Report and MIT Technology Review** showed that:
 - 58% of general population employees say they look to their employer to be a trustworthy source of information about contentious societal issues.
 - Concerns about “fake news” and misinformation remain high and less than 4 in 10 people trust the news from mainstream media outlets.
 - WhatsApp was the primary channel responsible for the spread of fake news and misinformation at the start of global lockdowns from February 2020 onwards.



PLANNING THE CAMPAIGN

From our research, it was clear that we needed to create two separate communication programmes to address and manage the issues:

- Programme 1: The Journey Back to the Classroom
- Programme 2: Not the end of SPARK Schools – Retrenchments and School Closures

With the barrage of challenges, ByDesign Communications was challenged to create a sustained communication programme to engage with employees and mitigate SPARK Schools reputational risk as they embraced learning in lockdown.

We had two key objectives for these communication programmes:

1. Keep SPARK Schools out of the media and off social media - reduce panic and speculation and **contain situations internally and externally.**
2. To **build trust:**
 - a. **Keep employees informed** amidst contentious issues such as retrenchments, salary cuts, TERS and closing of schools
 - b. To entrench SPARK Schools as a company that is committed to supporting its employees during a crisis to the best of its ability and retain talent

Programme 1: The Journey Back to the Classroom

- Focus was placed on determining how and when to best channel communication through to employees and through which communication channels, so as to avoid leakage of sensitive information thereby containing issues that otherwise could escalate externally and bring SPARK Schools into disrepute. Reputation management internally was closely aligned with Reputation management externally and was approached as one holistic communications plan.
- Develop clear and consistent messaging as lockdown conditions and COVID-19 cases unfolded – keeping all leadership teams, Support Office staff and teachers and employees across the 21 schools informed and engaged.



EXECUTION

As the pandemic unfolded so did the various challenges. Sustainability of the company along with job security remained concerns amongst employees over the 10 months. The employee communication strategy and approach were executed and adapted for unforeseen issues along the way.

Programme 1: Journey Back to the Classroom



- **Make communication human.** We brought SPARK Schools leadership, especially CEO and co-founder Stacey Brewer and Head of Human Resources Pascal DesFontaines, to the fore.
- All steps taken by SPARK Schools to mitigate the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure the sustainability of the company was communicated upfront ie.
 - Facilitating payment holidays with its suppliers/landlords
 - Reducing staff and executive salaries
 - Retrenching some Support Office staff
 - Applying for TERS funding
 - Allowing parents to pay their fees over 12 months instead of 10
- Regular communication around **salary payments, salary/hour cuts, lay-offs, retrenchments** and expected salary increases.



- Communication/education on the **TERS programme** - Payment delays from TERS caused speculation amongst employees that SPARK Schools had been withholding payments. Activities to address this:
 - Short **weekly updates** on where TERS process was at, even if there was no movement in the process; TERS news in the media was shared (email and WhatsApp animation/images).
 - **FAQ** - All questions received by employees consolidated into one FAQ document. This was packaged into a **video** of Head of HR addressing each question.
 - **Monthly face-to-face feedback sessions** where Head of HR visited each school
 - A **direct enquiry line** to Head of HR, via whatsapp where employees could send questions through for him to answer via a direct personal voice note (not written).
 - **Weekly catch up calls with Head of HR and school Principals** – red flags of disgruntled/resistant staff etc could be raised and each issue addressed on a case by case basis.

Programme 2: Not the end of SPARK Schools – Further retrenchments and School Closures

- **Contain the message - School Closures - 3 schools affected**
 - All meetings were held the same time, same day at the 3 affected schools, to ensure consistent messaging, and reduce spread of misinformation.
 - Regional managers were message trained on the morning of the announcement, again to minimise spread of information.
 - Message training was held by the ByDesign Communications team for the regional managers to equip them in affectively addressing the issues internally with employees but also with parents, unions and media.
 - As the CEO could not be in 3 places at once, a **video** was produced where she explained the measures taken to avoid the closures. This ensured a personal commitment and human touch by the CEO.





- Only once all 150 affected staff members at the 3 schools had been notified in person about the closures, written communication was then shared which included FAQs for all employees.
- Townhalls on the morning after the announcement were held at all other SPARK Schools to provide teachers and staff an opportunity to ask questions



Townhall meetings

- Information to parents was shared in email and WhatsApp videos by the Principals (messaging ensured that the particular school was not affected or closing)
- Key messaging was to stress to employees the measures that were being taken to absorb as many of the affected staff into the network and the process around applying for existing vacancies
- During the retrenchments 5 staff representatives per affected school attended the consultations to ensure that they were representative of the overall staff compliment. They represented the voice of that particular school and ensured communication was filtered to school employees and encouraged internal engagement.



EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

In the end, we believe the objectives were met – SPARK Schools was **1) kept out of the media and off social media**; talent retained through **2) building trust** and transparency.

1.

- ✓ No stories around TERS, school closures, COVID-19 cases or retrenchments made media headlines. (eg 12 employees from one school contracted COVID-19 simultaneously and information contained).
- ✓ Despite employees not being unionised, a Union tried to leverage off the vulnerability of employees. This was nipped in the bud through counsel and message development/training executed by ByDesign Communications.

2.

- ✓ CEO and head of HR visible throughout and led communication
- ✓ 90% retention of employees by end of 2020 (excluding retrenchments)
- ✓ SPARK Schools covered the delayed TERS portion of salaries each month which employees appreciated
- ✓ NPS survey at end of 2020 indicated the following as best things about working at SPARK Schools:
 - i. Growth - professional development
 - ii. Scholars
 - iii. Culture
 - iv. Colleagues

Word count 1229 – Excluding Opening Statement, and picture captions.



Please see client letter of PRISM entry approval.

CLIENT ENDORSEMENT LETTER



1 Sturdee Avenue
Rosebank
Johannesburg
2146 |
www.sparkschools.co.za
info@sparkschools.co.za

To Whom it May Concern,

RE: PRISM AWARDS 2021

This letter hereby certifies that I, **Nobuhle Ncube**, in my capacity as **Head of Strategy and Growth at SPARK Schools**, acknowledge and endorse **ByDesign Communication's** use of the Service, Persistence, Achievement, Responsibility and Kindness campaign submission into the PRISM awards for 2021 in the Employee Communications.

Should you have any queries, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Nobuhle Ncube
Head of Strategy and Growth
SPARK Schools