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.
 - o 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)
 - o 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:
 - o 58% of general population employees say they look to their employer to be a trustworthy source of information about contentious societal issues.
 - o Concerns about "fake news" and misinformation remain high and less than 4 in 10 people trust the news from mainstream media outlets.
 - O 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.





From classroom to dining room learning

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

- All possible scenarios the pandemic posed to the organisation and its employees were mapped out and ByDesign communications counselled and supported the team in developing a detailed communication roll out plan for all stakeholders, including employees, across issues and time frames.

		COMMUNICATION PLAN									
Date	Audience	Objective of Communication	Medium of Communication	Key Message	Owner	Author	Link to Communication	From	Sender	Status	Potential Responses/Result/Risks
	Robeholders: 1. Board 1. Board 1. Board 1. Prospective Investors 2. Prospective Investors 5. Affective Investors 6. Support Employees 6. Support Employees 6. Support Employees 6. Affective Investors 7. Media 7. Media 7. Media 7. Community Representatives	E. g. prominess - Prevention - Prevention - Exempt Automorphism - Invitation	Email? Virtual Meeting? FZF Meeting? Press Release? Social Meedia Post? etc.	- Overseching Narrative - Key points that must be communicated	Person who is ultimately responsible for ensuring that communication takes place	Who is writing this communication? Who will draft the press release? Who will make the slideshow? Etc.	Link to email draft/press release/presentation for meeting/meeting agenda etc.	present during the	Who is sending out this small or meeting request o press release? etc.	Where in the process is the communication? Choose from disp down list	What could be the consequence sponse to this communication?
9/16/2020	Phase 1	Solories & TERS Undotte	<i>Emoil</i>	- Salaries will not go up to 85% in October but in November instead due to continued law collections - Low likelihood of banuses due to law collections - SPARK does not qualify for TERS support in paying salaries from the morth of July answards.	Pascal	Nikki/Karaba	https://dacs.google.com/da commt/d/109arpihA0WK 014badXKFAQN-1/Mbd4 H-1FNM/adit	Pascal	Mikki	Corp.	Resignations Go Slows Increased negative EUSA action at sit
9/22/2020		To inform board of project plan, timings and commencement of process	[mail	Announcement of affected schools Explanation of process and project plan Reiterate that this consolidation will make the organisation stronger.	Stocey	Stacey		Stocey	Kreeson	_	
	FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL HOUDAYS	Landing of process	E.FFEGG	activity)	July	листу		Jucey	AZERSANI	-ATR	
	Prospective Investors	To notify stakeholder group that we are embarking upon this process	Empl	Announcement of affected schools Opplanation of process and project plan Reiderste that this consolidation will make the organisation stronger	Stacey/Corne	Stacey/Corne		Stocey/Corne	Stacey/Corne	Sent	
9/30/2020	Regional Managers (RM's)	- Agree RM's role in leading change until December	F2F @10:00om	Dealing with and leading the change, anticipated risks and apportunities, retention of skills	Cllette and Carrie	Clette and Carrie		N/A	N/A	Sent	RM responses to planned changes
	LAST DAY OF SCHOOL HOUDAYS			appearance of annual of annual							
10/5/2020	Affected School Leadership & All RMs	To notify stakeholder group that we are embarking upon this process	Virtual Meeting (with recording available to all participants thereafter)	- Announcing affected Schools - Explanation of 5189a process - Expected Next Steps	Pascal	Cloudie		N/A	N/A	Sent	
10/5/2020	All RMs, All School Leadership & Support Managers	To notify stakeholder group that we are embarking upon this process	Meeting Virtual (with recording available to all participants thereafter)	- Announcing affected Schools - Explanation of 5189a process - Expected Next Steps	Pascal	Cloudia		N/A	N/A	Sent	
10/5/2020	Affected School Employees, Leadership & RMs	To notify stakeholder group that we are embarking upon this process	Virtual Meeting (with recording available to all participants thereafter)	- Announcing affected Schools - Explanation of 5189a process - Expected Next Steps	Pascal	Claudia		N/A	N/A	Sent	
10/5/2020		To notify stakeholder group that we are emborking upon this process	Virtual Meeting (with recording available to all participants thereafter)	Announcing affected Schools Explanation of \$188a process Expected Next Steps	Pascal	Claudia & Fluxmans		N/A	N/A	Sent	

Holistic communications plan developed detailing audience, messaging and key timing of communication to mitigate reputational risk



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.
 - o Facilitating payment holidays with its suppliers/landlords
 - o Reducing staff and executive salaries
 - o Retrenching some Support Office staff
 - o 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.
 - o Monthly face-to-face feedback sessions where Head of HR visited each school
 - o 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
 - O 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.
 - o 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.
- o 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

- o 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
- O 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