

Consultancy/NGO/Companies/Government Departments

The Abashitshi social mobilization

Sectors

Community Relations

## **100 Word summary**

### **Fires reduced by 89% with social mobilization**

The Sappi Forestry Division in KwaZulu-Natal has one goal: meet the company's mills timber demand. Fires lighted deliberately, posed a major threat to this goal. After research, DevCom and Sappi implemented a social mobilisation project with unemployed youth, named the Abashintshi (Changers in isiZulu). The programme created a credible communication channel for Sappi to convey messages (picture stories, training sessions, etc.) to community members. The communities realised that plantations were their assets too, and within 18-months, the number of fires declined from 297 to 33 in the project areas, whilst the reputation increased.

### **Entry**

#### **STATEMENT OF OPPORTUNITY**

Sappi Limited is a global woodfibre group that focuses on dissolving wood pulp, paper pulp, paper and products in adjacent fields. It provides solutions to its customers in more than 100 countries. One of the company's largest Forestry Divisions is in the KwaZulu-Natal province.

The business was faced with a high incidence of arson and a lack of community engagement. DevCom's research found that the messages in the communities were different from what was originally intended by Sappi. Misconceptions that had taken hold over time had become the reality of people in communities. It was believed that arson and timber theft could be linked directly to these misconceptions.

#### **RESEARCH**

The research project aimed to understand community perspectives. DevCom conducted the baseline research in 2014. The research included a management workshop, facilitated questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and drama facilitation. The mix of both qualitative and quantitative data confirmed the need for improved relations between Sappi and its neighbouring communities. Almost 65% of community members indicated a preference for face-to-face communication from a community messenger.

The communities were willing to form a relationship with Sappi to address the fire situation and were solution focused. They proposed community engagement, job creation and fire education as the three top solutions. Because Sappi mostly talked about fires and when there were fires, the research showed that the communities associated Sappi with fires. Sappi had to change its own dialogue and communication to bring about change, away from the focus of fire. The research also pointed out high youth unemployment, lack of activities for children in school holidays (when fire incidents were higher) and myths about Sappi and fires.

#### **PLANNING**

In response to research findings, a counterintuitive strategy to purposefully use unemployed young people with messages other than fire prevention was developed.

#### **Key Objectives**

1. To reduce the number of fires with 10% (40 fires) per annum.

2. Actively manage the perceptions of the Sappi stakeholders and influence the qualitative research feedback to be 60/20/20 (positive/neutral/negative).
3. 36 Abashintshi hired & trained, and tracking their continued professional development, meeting their community engagement targets (45 people per Aba per month).
4. 18 ABCD initiatives in the communities

### **Target audiences**

Internal: Sappi management to oversee and communicate the process internally, and the Foresters who are the local SAPPI contact and support to Abashintshi.

External: Community members whom we had a good profiling of after the research, to receive the message and effect positive change, and community leaders who were opinion-formers in communities, that the Abashintshi pulled close to reach their goals.

### **Messages**

#### **Abashintshi – inspired by Sappi**

Selecting ‘Abashintshi’, the Zulu word for ‘changers’, as the name of the project was a powerful message in itself, and branding was built around this. A logo that symbolises a helping hand branching out into communities was designed, supported by the tagline, “inspired by Sappi”. The latter is a direct link to the Sappi brand (whose tagline is “Inspired by life”). This brand positioning ensures that the project is not limited to Sappi involvement, but can form additional partnerships. Subtle key messages were developed to support the process of participants drawing their own conclusions about Sappi and its values during the training sessions.

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#### **Communication channels and vehicles**

1. Monthly training sessions and community contact sessions.
2. Training material, Posters, flyers
3. Picture stories. Due to the low literacy levels in the area, a visual aid was created to explain complex concepts.
4. Abashintshi Facebook group
5. Photographs and videos.
6. Reports

#### **Management Consultation**

Monthly KPIs was developed and reported on to ensure that management understood the project’s return on investment, including the fire statistics. Reports were discussed in monthly consultations sessions.

## **EXECUTION**

#### **The key steps of the action plan for the implementation of the project included:**

1. Develop a theory of change, and detailed monthly action plans for the 12-month period (reviewed every 12 months).
2. Prepare the communities for the Abashintshi project. A research-informed decision was taken to work through alternative social structures, such as churches, schools and spaza shops, rather than traditional leadership structures.
3. Recruit two Abashintshi per community (in 18 communities) through advertising with posters and flyers in the communities. Application forms were placed at distribution points and collected by a DevCom KZN employee.
4. Raise awareness by introducing the Abashintshi to the tribal authorities and leadership.
5. Mobilise the Abashintshi. DevCom facilitated one three/four-day contact sessions per month with the Abashintshi, after

which they went out to train fellow community members. The training included:

- Asset-based Community Development (ABCD).
- Youth life skills training.
- Ifa Lethu – legacy programme for the elderly
- Holiday programmes.

6. Monthly site visits – in order to support the Abashintshi's implementation of ABCD and holiday programmes in the communities a monthly site visit was conducted.

### **Difficulties encountered and adjustments made during implementation**

The rough rural project area necessitated the buying of a 4x4 vehicle. Unbudgeted for, the vehicle clocked 5 666 miles (9 120km) during the project period 2015, ferrying the facilitator safely to and from the participating communities. The distance travelled doubled for 2016.

Most community members were not proficient in English and their literacy and education levels were low. DevCom included a local isiZulu speaking team from the start, and translated most critical communication material i.e. pictures stories into isiZulu.

The project could only continue if it could proof return on investment. This was achieved through the money saved by shifting perceptions from Sappi as the giver of all things, to community members as the creators of their own wealth, and by cost saved from the reduction in fires.

### **EVALUATION**

The research was repeated in 2015 and in 2016, with community members who have participated in the Abashintshi workshops and those who have not. Both groups' perceptions of Sappi and their communities showed improvement, proving the effectiveness of social mobilisation even when people do not interact directly with the change agents.

The largest change of perception occurred in the community relationship with Sappi. In 2014, some 30,4% of participants reported dissatisfaction with Sappi; in 2015 the number was 16%, with 84% indicating that they were very satisfied with their relationship with Sappi. During 2016 re-audit 75% indicated they were satisfied with their relationship with Sappi. A goal was set to achieve 60% positive, 20% neutral and 20% negative feedback in 2015. Negative feedback shifted from 51.4% (2014) to only 17% (2015) with a slight increase to 27% (2016). The ABCD methodology has had a major effect with only 9% of the communities expecting sponsorship and assistance compared to 51% in 2014.

Fires declined from to 297 (2014) to 33 (2016) in the target area between 1 January 2015 and 31 October 2016. This is a reduction of 89%. In the areas that the pilot was not implemented, fires only reduced with 5%. Other influences, notably weather patterns, were very similar during 2014, 2015 and 2016.

36 Abashintshi were trained. They became change agents and micro-enterprise owners in their communities. The Abashintshi reached an average of 3 558 community members with their contact sessions monthly in 2015, in 2016 the figure was 13524.

The programme was expanded to the KZN North and Mpumalanga regions in 2017.

### **Testimonies online: keyword search - Abashintshi**

► 11:35

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7vTzPehBlQ>

<https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/sunday-tribune/.../282617442380927>

[www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/627/147273.html](http://www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/627/147273.html)

