

SPARKing an agency revolution

 By Leigh Andrews

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It's not common for media houses to launch their own ad agencies, but that's exactly what happened when [NAB and Habari Media merged](#) - SPARK was born, in the most intriguing way.

SPARK agency is the relative new kid on the block, run by old hands with all the necessary experience. So you could also call it 'an old-fashioned advertising agency with a relevant and modern twist'.



Kirsten Dugmore

That's an interesting mix, especially as the agency launch event was titled 'Strategically Come Dancing' and featured applause-worthy hip-hop, mamba and Bollywood moves - not just from the hired dance professionals that got the crowd in the mood but also from big industry names that put in the hours, swallowed their nerves and took to the floor from agencies like PHD, Carat, Starcom Mediavest, MediaShop, Vizeum and OMD.

Kirsten Dugmore, known as 'the campaigner', heads up SPARK Media's innovation and creative division. She lets us in on just how the 'internal agency' that produces creative backed by research and facts came to be and how it plans on disrupting the conventional agency thinking...

A launch like no other

Dugmore says they needed to do something 'sticky' and memorable for their launch, with the intended outcome of an event that clients wanted to attend, got agencies involved, left people with an understanding of who SPARK Media is and would keep people talking once the event was over.

They certainly achieved on the above with a concept including key agencies as participants, a smart move that helped to spread the talkability of the event and encouraged some healthy competition - literally - in the dance-off won by PHD's street hip-hop duo of MD Wayne Bishop and junior strategist Yamkela Nkanzela. The dance spectacle was designed to boost interest in an industry characterised by monthly start-ups and ideas that branch out in ways that prove successful as they've not been done before. Success at the event was so popular it [trended on Twitter](#).

The event also had a nostalgic aspect that came from a special 'SPARK Media' version of *Get It* magazine given to all SPARK's direct and agency clients, with 2,000 copies printed as a keepsake of the evening for those who attended and to

give those who couldn't be there a feel for what it was all about, especially as various SPARK departments you may otherwise not have known about are introduced on the pages in a fun and engaging way. Clients enjoyed the photos of the contestants, as well as seeing themselves in the social pages and [CEO Gill Randall](#) as a cover girl.

That special agency 'SPARK'

One of SPARK Media's main differentiating factors is that it is run like an internal agency in that it provides media and market insights as well as strategic and creative media direction to its clients. It forms the hub of a much bigger market intelligence team, including marketing services, brand and PR, as well as research and geographic information system or GIS.

The foundation of all work they do is based on the payoff line "Insights that Ignite". Dugmore says implementing this includes doing extensive market/product research, consulting with channel specialists on best practices for their various platforms, and working alongside the marketing services team on best use of the client's budget, reach or exposure for the client, depending on their communication objectives. They're also equipped to use their findings and channel knowledge to propose creative or content strategies for clients.

That doesn't mean everything's digital, though. They see themselves as old fashioned as they're able to go from brief through to execution on all of their channels. The impact of the fast-paced, ever-changing, progressing face of digital is that they have to stay nimble, ensuring they're up to speed on the latest developments and innovations within this space. It's definitely a 'new' media world at the moment, so the team ensures it's on the forefront of best practice - not only on digital platforms, but also in learning how digital and traditional work best together and how to optimise a client strategy on and off screen, ensuring synergy and consistent brand messaging.

ROOTS research and involvements with EBI help the team stay up to date on consumer behaviour, all of which comes together as an incredibly exciting, dynamic space. With all these skills in place, they're equipped to add huge value to our clients.

This 'thinking beyond the norm' is evident from the first moment you meet a SPARK team member, as their business cards give insight into each team member's personality through pie charts. While it's a fun way of displaying the effectiveness of insights, Dugmore points out pie charts" are also an element of SPARK's branding or corporate identity, with pie charts aplenty on their in-development website.

SPARKing insights that ignite

Spark Media's marketing intelligence hub is big and established, as it was combined and inherited from NAB and Habari. Another plus is their Roots research, which has been going strong for over 35 years. With more than R50m invested by Caxton in this, there's little wonder it's South Africa's largest urban, community-level quantitative survey. The data is put to good use in providing marketers, advertisers, media and creative agencies with demographic information as well as intelligence and insights into buyers' behaviour in various categories.

SPARK is also a member of global marketing science institute EBI, which provides empirical evidence on some groundbreaking insights into how consumers behave.

Dugmore says SPARK's role is to draw on all these resources and find the "so what" for their clients, proposing creative executions in line with these insights. There's just so much marketing intelligence out there that SPARK works to translate these into workable insights and creative opportunities for clients. In doing so, their clients can run more effective communication, usually with an integrated approach.

As to what we can expect from the SPARK of the future, Dugmore lists exciting, innovative, cross-channel, delicious ideas and campaigns - get ready!

For more on SPARK agency, [visit their website](#) and follow their [Twitter feed](#).

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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