

Sappi empowers youth by providing access to Covid-19 information during Youth Month

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Young people in South Africa's rural areas have been using their power to communicate by getting active on their social media platforms with useful information about curbing the spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus. Thanks to a useful set of illustrated messages created by Sappi Southern Africa about how to combat the disease, the team of Abashintshi are actively aligning their activities with the theme for South Africa's 2020 Youth Month, which is **"Youth Power: Growing South Africa together in the period of Covid-19"**.



The Abashintshi are a group of enthusiastic youngsters who volunteered to receive community development training sponsored by Sappi over the last few years and have been using this knowledge to bring about social mobilisation in their communities. "Normally, they would be arranging the Sappi-sponsored school holiday programmes around now to keep youngsters entertained, but the lockdown and the disruption of school schedules, prevented them from doing so this year," comments Mpho Lethoko, Sappi Southern Africa communications manager. "Instead, in the spirit of Youth Day, they are using their power to influence other youths by informing and uplifting communities by spreading the word about Covid-19 using their mobile phones," she says.

In an earlier statement about Youth Month 2020, commenting about the negative effects of the coronavirus pandemic on all of society and on youth employment, Sport, Arts and Culture Minister Nathi Mthethwa had urged the youth of 2020 "to help to rebuild a society post Covid-19," saying that the potentially life threatening disease, "has some positive spin offs as many young people especially those in the creative industries are creating 4th industrial revolution's solutions that transcend beyond the end of the pandemic."

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic in February, Sappi has been creating easy-to-understand illustrated infographics that have been distributed within their own operations on a regular basis and which has also been shared with the employees and families of their contractor staff. These educational messages which are all available in English and isiZulu have also been made available to the broader public via the Abashintshi. The messages deal with a number of topics including personal hygiene, social distancing, how to wear and care for masks, how to distinguish Covid-19 symptoms, how to self-isolate and how to cope with the stress and anxiety of the lockdown situation, to name some.

“In my role as Umshintshi in the Njavini community, I have undertaken the responsibility of sharing information with my community to stop the spread of the virus. I have been busy creating awareness around Covid-19 to my close friends, community members and church groups, and I am very pleased that I have seen a change in their behaviour. People are using masks correctly which is important as the economy slowly opens up. It is great to see Covid-19 infographic posters put up in tuck shops around my area,” says Ntando Sawoni.

Siphokazi Centane from Umgababa agrees and says: “The lockdown period has been challenging for our community, but I have tried to contribute towards the fight against Covid-19 by sharing the WhatsApp Covid-19 infographics provided by Sappi. They are very helpful, and people have expressed their appreciation for the information.” She finds that in her engagements with the community, children have been the most receptive: “They often play at our local sports ground in large groups and I tell them about the consequences of large gatherings, and they take my advice to heart and listen. I have also bought several face masks from a local lady who makes and sells them to me at a discounted unit price of R5, and I give these to youngsters in my community.”

Phumlani Mhlongo from Sokhulu in Northern KZN says that the fact that the pandemic has forced them to put some of their Abashintshi community projects on hold, has made him focus on curbing the spread of the virus. “I have warmly received the task and have been actively teaching different communities around Sokhulu about Covid-19 and the measures that we need to adhere to in order to minimise the spread of the virus in our communities. I have been sharing Covid-19 infographics via WhatsApp and it is impressive to hear positive talks inside taxis, people expressing their commitment to obey the law and to take all the necessary precautions to fight the virus.

“The Sappi infographics are great in that we have them in IsiZulu and English. I have also encouraged the elderly to purchase at least three face masks, as they find it difficult to wash their mask on a daily basis. I will be visiting schools in my community and churches to encourage people to continue adhering to health and safety precautions put in place to fight Covid-19.”

About the Sappi Abashintshi programme

Abashintshi is an isiZulu word meaning the 'changers'

The programme was established by Sappi in 2015 in conjunction with a community development agency, DevCom. Since its inception the programme has been extended to 63 communities in KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga and today involves 122 active Abashintshi.

Based on the Asset-based community development (ABCD) methodology and with the objective of establishing and helping activate entrepreneurial enterprises among their communities, the Abashintshi are taught how to facilitate life skills and to encourage community members in recognising their assets, and adopting a 'can-do' attitude, putting these assets to work. They also conduct the Ifa Lethu Legacy programme with the elders in their communities to get a greater appreciation for their heritage and culture.

During school holidays, the Abashintshi arrange holiday programmes for school children, providing opportunity for the children to participate in sporting and creative activities, whilst also using their Life Skills training to equip the children with leadership and social skills.

In their second year of training they also undergo Business Skills training, which further helps with offering entrepreneurship training and the establishment of micro-businesses in their communities.

The programme has resulted in excess of 500 small businesses that have either been started up or rejuvenated with the assistance of the Abashintshi. These range from brickmaking projects, poultry and pig farms to creches and home

industries, among a host of others

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