

Emerging Diversity and Inclusion: Spark



Video link: <https://vimeo.com/album/4446506/video/229799697>

Spark's first-ever Auckland Pride Parade float this year boasted 12 glamorously costumed Spark employees, including members of the executive team, 150 supporters walking or dancing along the parade route and 62 flags representing the nationalities at the company.

It was a big step forward from 2016 when an attempt to put together a float for the parade stumbled due to a perceived lack of leadership and support. Staff felt Spark wasn't ready to be "out and proud" in public and some didn't feel entirely comfortable with being out and Proud at work, says Senior Communications partner Michelle Baguley.

Spark is a telecommunications company providing fixed-line telephone services and a mobile network. It's also an internet service provider, and a major ICT provider to local businesses and employs 6000 staff across New Zealand.

The Pride initiative had its origins in Spark's fledgling Diversity & Inclusion plan, which includes pursuing a fast-tracked Rainbow Tick accreditation and the overarching ambition to become an inclusive company where everyone can bring their authentic selves to work.

Rohit DCunha, a Customer Experience lead at Spark Digital who became the float's co-ordinator, explains, "We wanted to do something that reflects the core values of our organisation: we're fun, energetic, diverse, and we support the communities we're part of."

After an initial meeting attracted 30 people brainstorming and offering leadership, an employee action group Spark Pride was formed. The group communicated via Spark's internal social media platform and a dedicated email address, sharing ideas about how

Spark should be represented. Eventually these were amalgamated into design elements and the final concept was decided by popular vote.

This was not a marketing exercise with any marketing input, but rather a staff initiative, intended to authentically represent Spark's Pride community and culture within Spark, so the costumes and the float itself were deliberately discreetly branded.

On the night of the parade, a pre-party was hosted at Spark before buses took participants to the parade. Spark painted its many Ponsonby Rd phone boxes rainbow, and for two weeks offered unlimited free WiFi to all Ponsonby Rd street-goers, giving away 350GB of data to 38,000 users.

The initiative had moral and financial support from Spark's senior leadership team, who were challenged to get on board with accepting, acknowledging and promoting diversity in the workplace by Managing Director Simon Moutter.

"Being diverse and inclusive will help Spark to perform even better in the market, and we'll attract the best talent to join a more diverse workforce," he says.. "We also want our people and their differences to mirror the diversity of our changing customer base, with a mix of gender, ethnicity, religion, age and sexual orientation."

Moutter appointed Chief Digital Officer Claire Barber as Executive Sponsor of LGBTQI activities and all the senior leadership team wore Pride T-shirts the day before the event and shared photos with staff on the company's internal social media platform.

By selecting such a public, visual, immersion experience, staff at every level within the Pride community at Spark now know they are supported by senior management, Michelle says.

"Externally the event has strengthened Spark's connection to the Pride community and demonstrated to customers and potential employees that we're a fully inclusive workplace."

The cohort who managed the Parade now run Spark Pride networking drinks and events and will shortly begin to plan for Pride 2018. It has spurred staff outside of Auckland to take action. Both Christchurch and Wellington teams have united for their own Pride activity. In Christchurch a large group of Spark people recently participated in Pipe for Pride.

A post-event survey showed that 88 per cent of participants would recommend attending Pride to another Spark colleague and 77 per cent said they would definitely attend next year.

Riki, a Spark team member, gave this feedback. "When we began this journey I thought Spark was a liberal place to work. But initiating conversations with colleagues at that early stage, I noticed some people were guarded in their responses, spoke in hushed tones and whispers. I realised people did not feel safe having an open conversation about the LGBT+ community and life.

"Six months later and a couple of things stood out to me as examples of our success and the changing conversations though Spark Pride. Some people approached me with thanks for championing open conversations which helped them to feel safe, confident, accepted and comfortable to be 'out' at work.

“Colleagues who have never asked how I identify, felt comfortable to initiate conversations with me to ask questions about the LGBT+ community and my life.”

Marlize says, “I live my life as an out lesbian and I don't hide the fact. Spark's participation in the Pride Parade shows everybody that the company supports diversity and accepts LGBT people. It makes me feel proud to be part of a company that allows me to be myself.”