ABSTRACT: A study by Kruse et al. (ISSW 2014) identified peer-to-peer communication as the key to influencing 17- to 30-year-olds riding in lift-accessed backcountry terrain. In a study commissioned by Project Zero, Kruse identified “peer ambassadors” as potentially more effective at reaching aggressive, young “sidecountry” riders than so-called top-down communication from traditional sources.

In December 2015, representatives from Backcountry Access (BCA), the International Freeskiers and Snowboarders Association (IFSA) and Project Zero (since renamed The Avalanche Project) executed on the Kruse study with a peer-to-peer awareness campaign using respected freeskiing competitors and film athletes as peer ambassadors. We teamed up to get these high-profile riders into avalanche courses and then prompted them to communicate their experiences to peers through social media channels. This was coupled with “IFSA Avy Education Month” and avalanche awareness presentations at five national events on the IFSA Jr. Freeskiing Tour.

The program was limited in scope, but provided valuable insights into how to affect the behaviors of this at-risk group of impressionable young out-of-bounds riders.

KEYWORDS: Avalanche education, avalanche awareness, lift-accessed backcountry skiing, sidecountry, freeriding, social media.

1. ORIGINS

The program to execute Kruse’s study was born from The Avalanche Project (formerly Project Zero). This organization was formed in 2013 out of a consortium of U.S. and Canadian avalanche forecast centers, educators, regulators and manufacturers with a common goal of reducing avalanche fatalities through well researched and consistent public safety messaging. That group included such organizations as the Colorado, Utah, and Northwest avalanche centers, Avalanche Canada, U.S. Forest Service National Avalanche Center, Snowsports Industries America, and Backcountry Access (BCA).

In the U.S. this coalition germinated from the Backcountry Task Force created by the industry
association, Snowsports Industries America (SIA). SIA’s annual user statistics indicated consistent growth in backcountry and out-of-bounds riding, but relatively flat sales of snow safety equipment (Fig. 1). SIA statisticians also noted the high percentage of online sales in the backcountry category, meaning there was a vacuum in snow safety mentorship traditionally provided by knowledgeable staff at specialty retail stores.

2. RESEARCH FINDINGS

To develop the strategy, Kruse and select individuals from Project Zero carried out a series of focus groups in 2014 with a total of 27 sidecountry riders ranging from 19 to 30 years of age, in Whistler, BC; Seattle, WA; Salt Lake City, UT, and Vail, CO. The key findings:

- Many of the participants considered themselves “out of bounds” or “sidecountry” riders, but not backcountry riders.
- They were generally undecided when asked if it was equally important to carry avalanche rescue equipment in lift-accessed terrain as in non-lift-accessed (backcountry) terrain.
- While the participants respected forecasters at their local avalanche centers, they indicated that peer-to-peer communication was more likely to affect their behavior than “top-down” communication. Peers include friends, retail staff, freeride film athletes, and others of similar age. A recurring theme was that many of them don’t “want to be that guy that holds up the group.”
- Taking a level 1 avalanche course can be difficult for a dedicated skier or snowboarder working several jobs and earning service industry wages. Several suggested that avalanche schools provide an online component so the classroom and field time can be shortened to a maximum of two days.
- Social media is the main communication tool between peers and should be a central aspect of any public safety messaging program.

3. PEER-TO-PEER INITIATIVES

Three main initiatives have come from the Kruse study: a POV video contest, IFSA Avy Education Month, and a peer ambassador program using BCA freeride athletes.
3.1 Video Productions

The Project Zero video contest, called “Know the Snow,” was carried out in the spring of 2014 and resulted in the submission of nearly 20 videos from contestants spanning five decades in age. Prizes were donated by GoPro and numerous other manufacturers, mainly members of the SIA Backcountry Task Force. Contestants were asked to submit POV (point of view) videos of themselves and friends preparing for a backcountry tour and exhibiting responsible backcountry behaviors while riding. The winner was a nine-year-old, which was ironic since his age disqualified him from taking advantage of the grand prize donated by Monashee Powder Snowcats.

In addition to these videos, which were shown on the Project Zero website, several other videos were produced through the Project Zero initiative (Fig. 3): a series of five videos from BCA entitled: “Backcountry Basics: Get the Goods Without Getting Buried,” a Mammut-sponsored instructional video with Jackson Hole Mountain Guides, and a remake of the groundbreaking youth-oriented awareness video, Know Before You Go (KBYG). While Project Zero wasn’t directly involved in KBYG, several key Project Zero members were involved and the video incorporated the unified message adopted by Avalanche Canada, Project Zero, and the key forecast centers:

- Get the Gear
- Get the Training
- Get the Forecast
- Get the Picture
- Get Out of Harm’s Way.

3.2 IFSA Avy Education Month

IFSA Avy Education Month took place in December, 2015. Avalanche Canada, BCA, the American Avalanche Institute (AAI), and the American Association for Avalanche Research and Education (AIARE) teamed up to get as many IFSA athletes enrolled in level 1 and avalanche awareness courses as possible at the beginning of their training seasons. Project Zero project manager Rachel Reich coordinated with the various groups to put freeride team coaches in touch with avalanche educators to schedule courses: nearly 150 riders took courses, with some in level 1 courses and others in KBYG and other awareness courses. Those athletes that took courses were encouraged to make social media posts for their peers to see. IFSA organizers provided a “cheat sheet” to these athletes with ideas for posts and relevant organizations to tag.

During the IFSA competition season that followed, Project Zero and IFSA sponsor BCA provided avalanche awareness clinics at six key IFSA Jr. Freeskiing Tour national events: Snowbird, Alpine Meadows, Crystal Mountain, Crested Butte, and Whistler, including a clinic on human factors provided by BCA athlete and freeride film star Michelle Parker (Fig. 4). Over 500 athletes participated in these events, with over half of them attending the clinics. In addition, at several of these events, representatives from BCA and IFSA co-sponsor SASS Global Travel set up a portable beacon training park at the competition venue, where athletes could practice and receive avalanche rescue instruction (Fig. 5).
Fig. 4: IFSA athletes attended safety presentations by BCA peer ambassadors at the IFSA Jr. Freeskiing national events.

Fig. 4: Between runs, IFSA athletes could practice search skills at the BCA beacon training park adjacent to the competition venue.

3.3 BCA Ambassador Program

The peer ambassador program extended beyond the IFSA athletes. Project Zero took advantage of BCA’s stable of freeride film athletes, and included them in the outreach program. In 2015, BCA implemented a new policy requiring all sponsored BCA athletes to have a minimum of level 1 avalanche training. For those currently sponsored athletes who didn’t have this formal training, BCA paid their expenses to take level 1 courses. They were asked to post their experiences on their social media channels (Fig. 5). These posts resulted in over 3000 Likes, a telltale metric often used to measure viewer “engagement.”

Fig. 5: Athletes taking avalanche courses were encouraged to post their experiences for their peers to see. This Instagram post from BCA athlete Wiley Miller produced 722 Likes.

4. BEYOND IFSA: EUROPE

On the European scene, the Freeride World Tour (FWT) has undertaken a similar partnership with the International Snow Training Academy (ISTA) to train FWT and FWT Qualifier athletes. The top 40 skiers and snowboarders on the FWT took ISTA’s entry-level, two-day ST1 training course in 2016. ISTA instructors provided these trainings surrounding three competitive events in Verbier, Switzerland; Chamonix, France; and Fieberbrunn Austria. ISTA directors have set of goal of training 2,000 athletes over the next three seasons.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The Avalanche Project/IFSA peer ambassador program represents a fresh new approach to reaching young, aggressive sidecountry riders. It replaces traditional “top down” public safety messaging with a grassroots, or “ground up” approach. While the scope of the program was limited, it provided valuable experience to those involved in how to facilitate peer-to-peer communication through social media.

With the 2015 release of KBYG and the network of instructors developed by the Utah and Colorado avalanche centers, The Avalanche Project’s goal of developing a unified message has been partially achieved. With this in mind, The Avalanche Project will need to determine how—or whether—to invest in the next phase of its mission. This will most likely depend on whether the organization can attract further industry support.
Pro freeriders command great respect in the North American snowsports industry and should be considered key opinion leaders. Freeride competitions and films could be as valuable to North American avalanche educators as the FIS World Cup is to successful European brands like Milka and Café Lavazza.

REFERENCES


Snowsports Industries Association, 2013: SIA Backcountry Retail Kit.