ABSTRACT: Across North America, the growth in sales associated with alpine skiing and boarding – from equipment to lift tickets - has been flat. Only backcountry touring is experiencing growth, with more people exploring beyond resort boundaries than ever before. This increase in interest has unfortunately not coincided with an increase in avalanche skills training or avalanche safety equipment sales. Despite a higher level of avalanche awareness, people continue to venture beyond resort boundaries unprepared and take risks that are beyond their skill or ability levels, resulting in close calls, injuries and fatalities. It is now critical to shift emphasis from raising awareness – predisposing a group about an issue – to creating the desired attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors that will allow for informed decisions; the “new normal” of backcountry and sidecountry exploration.

Project Zero is a new North American cooperative effort that seeks to significantly reduce avalanche fatalities by using a shared responsibility approach from all stakeholders. Participants include representatives from key North American avalanche centers, snowsports equipment manufactures, and resorts. Information alone will not lead to desired changes in behavior. Project Zero is using an alternative communications approach that is audience-driven, incorporating motivating factors and removing barriers to behavior change. In the Phase 1, focus group research was completed for the lift-accessed, backcountry audience. Key findings from the research included: heavy reliance on peer recommendations; disbelief that lift-accessed terrain warranted avalanche training or safety gear; practical barriers to snow safety training related to time and financial constraints.

KEYWORDS: social dimensions avalanche risk; behaviour change; heuristics theory; peer influence

1. INTRODUCTION

During the 2013/2014 season, for the first time ever, a consortium (Project Zero Team) of North American ski and snowboard equipment manufacturers and ski area managers joined forces with key avalanche forecast centers and avalanche educators in the United States and Canada to develop strategic priorities focused on avalanche safety for backcountry recreationists.

Review of existing studies related to the social dimensions of avalanche safety provided the foundation for new research, which included focus groups held in Seattle, WA; Salt Lake City, UT; Vail, CO; and Whistler BC in January and February 2014. The purpose of the focus groups was to identify:

- Product: what we want them to believe, know and do (our objectives)
- Price: what they need to give up to change their attitudes, awareness, and actions
- Place: where and when we can effectively reach them
Promotion: how we can inspire them to change (described as the pilot campaign in this document)

The snow sports industry has recognized an uptick in avalanche accidents that correlate directly with market growth in the backcountry segment. This surge in marketplace activity must be accompanied by an equally powerful promotion of a consistent safety message. Past communications efforts have been scattered and mainly perceived as irrelevant to the emerging lift accessed backcountry skier and rider. Many opportunities to develop long term loyalty, related to the offer of backcountry retail products and safety services, have yet to be realized.

The goal was to understand what’s holding the lift-accessed backcountry target group back from adopting the desired objectives, and also what kinds of incentives would encourage them to overcome those barriers. By understanding what will drive them to change (their friends), Project Zero can develop strategies that are more likely to resonate and result in behavior change.

2. RESEARCH APPROACH

The social marketing strategy was informed by both primary and secondary research. Beginning with a literature review of International Snow Science Workshop proceedings, the target audience became more defined as men aged 20-30 who ski or ride aggressive terrain, frequently explore beyond resort boundaries but have not completed any avalanche safety training.

2.1 Collaborative Design

The Project Zero team members included representatives from four North American avalanche forecast centers, a representative from the SnowSports Industries America (SIA) Backcountry Task Force, and representatives from the American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education (AIARE). It became clear that how the problem is described, both internally and externally, was an unexpected complicating factor. There was general agreement that "sidecountry" trends were the problem we were working to solve, but the group could not reach consensus on whether or how to use the term.

The Project Zero Team worked together during each step in the social marketing process to: compile and review baseline data; develop and refine a guiding creative brief; design and observe the focus group research; create and promote the pilot promotional campaign (Know The Snow); and analyze the results.

2.2 Research Methodology

A critical aspect to effective behavior change campaigns lies in audience segmentation. Target marketing involves breaking a market into segments and then concentrating the marketing efforts on one or a few key segments. This focus ensures that all of the marketing activities are effective. Through a collaborative process, the team evaluated and ranked various segment characteristics, including: group size, ease of influence, ease of accessibility, and resources required to communicate with target group. This process determined that future promotional efforts would be most effective in reaching the target audience through their avalanche trained peer group.

Over the course of two weeks, between January 27 and February 4, 2014, 27 focus group participants contributed to more than ten hours of dialogue about their experiences skiing and snowboarding beyond resort boundaries. They were recruited via local newspaper, radio and social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter. The research findings include perspectives shared from Whistler, BC; Seattle, WA; Salt Lake City (SLC), Utah; and Vail, CO. All were males between the ages of 19 and 30 who had many years of skiing/snowboarding experience among them, with 60% exploring beyond resort boundaries once a week, and the remainder at least twice a week or more, on average. None had any avalanche skills training.

Each focus group lasted approximately two hours and included an in-depth discussion to uncover the barriers to adopting avalanche safety protocols and skills training, and exploration of motivating factors for them. Participants were also asked about existing avalanche center communications tools and resort signage.

The insights into barriers and motivations for the adoption of primary belief, knowledge, and behavior objectives informed the design of a pilot promotional campaign. With information gleaned from this initial research, future promotional campaigns have the potential to catalyze a new norm of backcountry avalanche safety, establishing wide brand recognition that resorts, manufacturers, retailers and avalanche
safety information and education providers can apply to promote sound backcountry decision-making and the judicious use of their products.

2.3 Research Findings

The most significant insight shared from the focus group sessions is that these individuals rely on the recommendations of their peer group. When choosing new gear, terrain, or whether to invest in improving their mountain skills, this target audience makes decisions based on the recommendations of their social spheres of influence. They also look to brands they trust, as well as specialty retailers, for advice on where to go and what to bring when they venture into the mountains. Each section below outlines the desirable objectives and how they compared to focus group findings.

Primary Belief Objectives

- The sidecountry IS the backcountry. Riding a lift to exit the ski area and access the backcountry is the same as hiking into the backcountry.
- Being skilled in avalanche safety means that you can make informed decisions that can potentially reduce your risk in avalanche terrain.
- Avalanches can happen in places you visit all the time. You have to be practiced in avalanche rescue should a mistake be made and an accident occurs.

What They Believe

Many expressed uncertainty in the need for avalanche skills training because their perception of “side country” avalanche risk is low. They made more reference to in-bounds danger than backcountry terrain danger. This perception may be reinforced because avalanche incidences or close calls are taboo, and they rarely share stories with each other when they “mess up”. In Whistler and SLC, participants discussed being worried about what people would think of them if they made a serious mistake. Also, because they gather most of their avalanche preparation skills from friends, they have developed some undesirable shortcuts to evaluating the safety of terrain.

Further hesitation to believing in the value of training may be because, for some, their ignorance provides a kind of comfort. I’m not really scared, because I know nothing at all so I don’t really think about it, but if I know more, than I will feel more freaked out (Seattle).

Conversely, the Vail group reported feeling risk averse, likely due to recent high profile avalanche fatalities in the area. Overall, the groups did express feeling most confident in terrain they frequent, reinforcing the need to integrate the familiarity heuristic in messaging.

Primary Knowledge Objectives

- Know how and where to take safety training and to access the avalanche bulletin.
- Understand how avalanche training improves your ability to manage risk in the backcountry.
- Be able to share concerns about terrain choices with the group: discuss a plan, agree to travel together, decide together and respect everyone’s voice and veto.

What They Know

All groups expressed fairly mature understanding of ideal preparation procedures, providing examples such as: check the avalanche bulletin, carry safety equipment, talk as a group about what you are seeing, make changes to the plan as necessary. However, few reported these procedures to be part of their routine. Consequences to poor decisions were not well understood in any of the groups, as illustrated by one comment: I’ll hike back out on the road, that’ll be the worst case scenario. Or I guess I could freeze to death (Seattle).

They also joked about trusting guys with big powder skis: If they do it, and they’re still alive, they must be doing something right (SLC). Though we didn’t ask specifically, approximately half the number of focus group participants talked about owning and using safety gear such as transceivers, shovels and probes. In general, groups did seem uncertain about the availability/opportunity to participate in avalanche skills training. See below for barriers that will need to be addressed in messaging.

Primary Behavior Objectives

- Register for an avalanche training course
- Check the local avalanche bulletin and make a plan based on the information provided
- Purchase and carry a transceiver, beacon and shovel and know how to use those tools
What They Do

Despite knowing what they are meant to do, most participants admitted that they didn’t do those things very often. Regarding avalanche safety training, all reported positive associations with the information learned and the benefits that would be enjoyed (primarily their ability to keep up with their friends): “I don’t want to be the guy in the touring group that has to say, “You tell me what we’re doing?” Their decision to explore beyond resort boundaries is not always spontaneous; many talked about day-before planning. While they said that they did talk while they were out together, their conversations were rarely focused on the terrain – some even reported that they talk about summer mountain biking activities!

Primary Barriers to Desired Objectives

There is an overall perception that significant amounts of time and money are required to invest in training. Also, there is both the sense that they already know enough, or that a Level 1 Avalanche Course is too much for what they need. For the most part, all participants expressed value in avalanche safety training but identified a number of logistical barriers and preferences:

- Avalanche information is dense, it is intimidating, there is a lot to learn, and it’s overwhelming.
- Multi-day training is too expensive (average perception is that it costs between $300 and $500), would prefer to gather the information informally (from trained friends).
- Signing up for a course is viewed as important, but they have numerous jobs and the courses are intensive and also scheduled in locations that require travel.
- Classroom and field sessions should be broken up into different days and times of day (some evening work).
- Parts of the course should be available online.

Primary Motivations to Adopting Objectives:

Keeping up with their friends and being able to access terrain that they can’t now were frequent themes in all of the focus group discussions. Participants were all very concerned about not “being that guy” that slows the group down. People with avalanche training are well respected and considered to be leaders. Two comments from the Seattle focus group help to illustrate the way they connect avalanche safety training with their peers: I wish I had that. It’s nice to know that whoever you go out with cares enough about you; and, I decided to go for the more expensive beacon, because I was acutely aware that it would never save me, but it would save my friends.

Many participants also talked about getting ready for the season by watching pro films, and that the late fall timing of an avalanche skills training course would be ideal. They also discussed the need for a special “deal” or sponsorship, and a one-day, $100 avalanche course design was particularly appealing. Beyond monetary and logistical factors, peer pressure dominated as the driving force behind their commitment to training.

Major Influences

Peers, as well as freeride films, were cited as top drivers of decisions around their sport. Participants also talked about trusting retailers, both local small shops and large online retailers, for advice on what to buy and where to go. In all focus groups, participants talked about valuing local knowledge of the terrain and the special status that locals have because they seem to know the “secret spots.” I just don’t have the money for all the gear, so when I do go out there, I rely on people I ride with to gain that knowledge (Whistler). All focus group participants talked about their devout love of fresh powder and admitted that if the conditions were sublime, no amount of fear would hold them back.

When asked to compare different snow safety communications tools available to them, avalanche bulletins were ranked by the vast majority of focus group participants as being most influential to their decision-making. More testing of their ability to accurately interpret the information shared in avalanche bulletins would be useful to include in the next parts of the pilot campaign.

The value this target audience places on their peers cannot be over-stated. They trust their friends for advice about what to buy, where to go/where not to go, who they should ski/board with, and whether they need to improve their safety skills. They seem to have a consistent group of friends they ride with, and because they explore together as a group often, they make
assumptions about what they are seeing and doing that are not discussed. In many cases, it seemed that at least one member of the group had some avalanche training.

2.4 Promotional Pilot Project

The purpose of the pilot promotional campaign was to test the social marketing strategy with the target audience:

- **Place**: where can communications most effectively influence the target audience
  - Online, using social media channels

- **Messengers**: who can help to influence the target audience to shift their current belief, behavior and/or knowledge towards the desired outcome
  - Peers who already have avalanche training, and retailers in their local communities

- **Barriers**: what is holding the target audience back from our objectives
  - Perception of higher cost (time and money) than reward, as well as potential “sidecountry” avalanche risk

- **Motivations**: who and what will help to persuade them to change
  - Seeing desirable belief, behavior and knowledge objectives modeled for them by their peers using simple language

- **Promotion**: creative campaign that connects research findings with project objectives
  - Part 1: invite people with avalanche skills and equipment to create a short video showing how avalanche preparation is part of their daily routine.
  - Part 2: create a “montage” that highlights the best of the video submissions.
  - Part 3: promote and broadcast final film widely with a call to action to our primary target group: be leaders like these guys, and don’t get left behind.

In keeping with the insights from the focus groups, a peer-influencer approach to behavior change was developed. Recognizing that freeride films are a big part of the sidecountry rider culture, and also that recording and sharing adventures online is common, a user-generated video contest was launched. The videos were meant to illustrate that “guys just like them” engage in avalanche safety preparation.

2.5 Research Limitations

Focus group research is not intended to produce insights that can be generalized. The goal was to deeply understand the thinking and “mental models” of a narrowly defined target audience.

Financial limitations prevented the team from completing Part 3 of the pilot campaign.

It is worth noting that many avalanche center partners were managing other priority projects; maintaining promotional activities proved to be a challenge. Partnerships with retailers and resorts would significantly increase the reach of future promotional activities.

3. FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The research to date has helped to develop message design criteria, and most importantly, an overall strategy that will be most effective in reaching and influencing the identified target audience. While more work is necessary to develop and test the language and images to be used in ongoing messaging, the elements of an integrated approach are outlined below. The *Know the Snow* initiative was a tactic that applied the design criteria below. Future promotional campaigns may use a different approach.

**Product: Project Objectives**

Maintain mix of desired outcomes related to backcountry knowledge, belief and behavior, building on the specific learning from the research, such as:

- Demonstrate effective group communication in the field;
- Share the benefits of avalanche skills training, such as increased peer status, and recognize and build on the importance of peer motivation;
- Illustrate, through storytelling and peer, that avalanches can happen in popular sidecountry areas

**Price: Time and Money**

In order to increase the likelihood of the target audience accessing avalanche safety training, target audience preferences must be considered. The target audience is most open to
committing in the late fall, and are looking for exciting messages and “special-offer” incentives.

With regard to checking avalanche bulletins and purchasing and carrying equipment, retailers have an opportunity to cross-promote safe practices by: promoting avalanche training events, offering discounts to people who have training, broadcasting local avalanche bulletins in stores, and many other creative methods to meet the growing market demand. When people are buying their gear, they are likely more open to a third-party endorsement of a complementary product (in this case, avalanche skills training, gear, and bulletins) from a trusted local retailer.

Promotion: How to Reach the Target Group

As with all marketing experiences, most people ask the advice of their friends before making a decision. Avalanche skills training, and the responsible application of the training, is no different. Messaging needs to create the impression that the “new normal” of safety in the mountains has arrived, and that people who don’t adopt the knowledge and behavior objectives being promoted are lagging behind.

The peer influence among this demographic offers tremendous opportunity for compelling messaging. Connecting to the other contexts where friends socialize and drawing parallels to their habits in the mountains, using humor and unexpected language/imagery, would help to capture attention. There is also a role for industry to play, and many benefits available to them for demonstrating that they are both interested in side country terrain, and prepared to help people get equipped (both through gear and training).

Place: Where to Reach the Target Group

We learned from focus group participants that they are most receptive to avalanche skills training promotions at the very start of the season, or slightly before. This presents a tremendous opportunity for mutually beneficial partnerships with retailers. The shoulder season may be the perfect time, and specialty gear shops as well as online stores, may be the perfect venue for inspiring a new approach to the season. By using touring gear as a “trigger” for improved avalanche skills training, retailers have an opportunity to both demonstrate their commitment to their customer base and help to maintain growth in the backcountry market.

Message

We are unlikely to find a sound bite that sufficiently captures that complexity of “being prepared” for avalanche terrain. However, by staying focused on the belief, knowledge, and behavior objectives, and understanding the main influences, the language and imagery will have enough depth to last. Most important: the message must be simple. Connecting to the strong positive brand of avalanche centers, and the look and feel of an avalanche bulletin, is worth exploring.

Social marketing is an alternative approach to broadcast communications, which uses public advertising and popular messaging to influence public opinion. In social marketing, the goal is not to raise public awareness; it is to shift the behavior of a specific target audience through a strategy that includes belief, behavior and knowledge objectives. While this process requires more front-end investment in research and pilot testing to discern the target audience’s core values and belief systems, the final results are much more conducive to social transformation. As we all know, social transformation is a slow process and the commitment to creating a “new normal” must be long term.

The snow sports industry is poised to reap the benefits of this research through continued collaboration and support. Now is the time to demonstrate to the young, emerging backcountry audience that they are valued. Social transformation and individual behavior change is a slow process, and the commitment to creating a “new normal” of backcountry safety needs to be long term. While there may be regional differences in avalanche risk communication, it is clear that consensus around and adoption of consistent terminology, messaging, and strategic priorities would be beneficial to all organizations – and the public whom they serve.

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