RESCUE AT CHERRY BOWL: AN AVALANCHE CANADA MICROSITE EXPLORING THE MANY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FROM A SUCCESSFUL BACKCOUNTRY AVALANCHE RESCUE

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ABSTRACT: Too often, educational opportunities in avalanche safety are based in tragedy. Rescue at Cherry Bowl is a lesson from success; three backcountry skiers, deeply buried by a large avalanche, were dug out alive in less than 20 minutes. The group that rescued these victims had recently taken a companion rescue course—a choice that made the difference between life and death.

When Avalanche Canada heard of this near-miraculous backcountry rescue, we knew we wanted to tell this story to a wider audience. Through Rescue at Cherry Bowl, we’ve explored an innovative narrative technique. Using video, audio, images and text, this microsite allows the viewer to examine different aspects of the day’s events. The components are designed to complement the central narrative, with the goal of enriching the viewer’s understanding of avalanche safety and highlighting the importance of training. The power of story-telling to effect change has long been recognized. This paper will explore the many opportunities and challenges inherent in a digital approach to this age-old technique in education.

KEYWORDS: rescue training, education, awareness

1. INTRODUCTION

When The New York Times published Snow Fall—the avalanche at Tunnel Creek in late 2012, we—and millions of other readers—were mesmerized by the story and the way it was told. “Snow Fall” went on to win a Pulitzer Prize, ushered in a new age in digital storytelling, and inspired us at Avalanche Canada to do something similar.

In March, 2013, we knew we had the perfect subject when we heard about a remarkable rescue. Four experienced skiers were hit by a size 3.5 avalanche in a popular backcountry region in northwest BC locally known as Cherry Bowl. Three skiers were buried between 1.5 and 2 metres deep. The fourth member of the party lost his pack in the avalanche and was left on the surface with only his transceiver.

Another group of four backcountry skiers witnessed the avalanche from high on the ridge of Cherry Bowl. This group, also experienced, had very recently taken a Companion Rescue Skills course from a local guide, in the interest of honing their skills. They flew into action and within 20 minutes, had rescued all three victims.

2. OPPORTUNITY

In avalanche accident prevention programs, case studies often rely on tragedy as a learning tool. A lot went wrong at Cherry Bowl and there are lessons there but the miraculous rescue effort allows us to explore the many things that went right and make the learning potential that much more powerful.

In addition to the extraordinary story itself, we were lucky that a small production company was in the area in the months following the accident. Tin House Creative of Crested Butte, Colorado, shot riveting in depth interviews with each of the individuals involved, all of who were articulate and engaging. This deeply personal and emotional footage formed the basis of the microsite.

Working with Tin House Creative, we knew we would get some terrific video. While video on its own can be an effective educational tool, we envisioned additional, more interactive elements that would encourage viewers to explore different aspects of the story. The goal was on both engage and entertain the viewer on an informative and educational journey.

2. FINANCING

As a non-government, non-profit organization, Avalanche Canada has a limited budget. We knew we would have to pursue outside sponsorship to make this site a reality.

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In the fall of 2014 we scraped together enough money to pay Tin House Creative to create an 8-minute promotional video from their footage, telling the story of the rescue from the perspective of both the survivors and the rescuers.

Over the winter of 2014–15, we used this excellent and highly charged short to showcase the project and get sponsors on board to help support the project.

3. DEVELOPMENT

By the spring of 2015, we felt we had enough sponsorship money to go ahead and contracted a local web designer to work with our in-house IT person. After a few false starts, a vision for the site’s overall structure had gelled. We used the 8-minute promo video as the ‘backbone’ of the site, splitting it into five short segments to form the top of each chapter of the microsite.

Now that we had a structure, the main focus was to decide which elements would be explored, and how. A key part to this step was to ensure the treatments we envisioned were practical in terms of what we could accomplish, given our minimal budget and limited IT resources.

Many great ideas fell by the wayside, victim to the harsh reality of economics. The “flyover” used so effectively by The New York Times to give viewers a sense of geography was one of them. The dream of an animated sequence showing surface hoar growth proved to be just a dream, as did the idea for an annotated avalanche video, highlighted with informative notes as it moves through the phases of a slide—from silence to violence and back to icy calm.

While we were limited by our coding capacity, we had a wealth of footage. Tin House Creative shot additional interviews full of “teachable moments,” great clips full of potential to impart important lessons. The challenge lay in balancing the amount of video with other elements—text, audio, still images and graphics.

We ended up with short (<2 minute) bios on each of the four survivors and four rescuers, a video on the importance of training and another examining the human factors at play in each group.

4. DELAYS

With design and videos completed in the summer of 2015, we planned to launch the site at our 2015 fall Annual General Meeting. However, the challenge of finalizing the coding by this deadline proved to be too much for our IT team of one.

Lacking the resources to contract this out, we aimed to have the site live by early winter. But in February, we realized we had to put off the launch again and decided to wait until the fall of 2016, a full year after the original launch date.

It’s important to note that if this project was the only thing on his desk, our IT leader Will Harding would have had this done on time and on budget. Avalanche Canada’s programs and services are increasingly web-based and our operations took priority over this project, severely limiting his time over the season.

5. CONCLUSION

Case studies are a tried and true method of education for a wide range of applications. Real-life stories bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering learners insight and understanding into the decisions of the situation.

We’ve learned a lot in building this microsite and look forward to applying these lessons to our next online project.

Fig. 1: The opening page of the Rescue at Cherry Bowl microsite.