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.

In Canada, the movement was born from an effort by Avalanche Canada, the U.S. Forest Service National Avalanche Center, and several other agencies including the Gallatin National Forest Service Avalanche Center. The group was responding to a request by the International Snow-
The mobile Manufacturers Association (ISMA) to centralize and simplify the disparate avalanche safety messages being produced by the wide assortment of agencies and other stakeholders across North America.

The name Project Zero grew from the successful Vision Zero program developed in Sweden to reduce traffic fatalities, presented at ISSW 2012 by Dale Atkins (Atkins, 2012). Atkins described that program as a “three-dimensional” approach to attack the problem, with participation from a wide range of stakeholders with a shared belief that the loss of human life is unacceptable.

With development of consistent public safety messaging as a primary goal and young sidecountry riders as the primary target, Project Zero hired Whistler, B.C.-based social marketing consultant Randi Kruse to determine what would be the most effective approach not just to reach this audience, but also to actually change their behavior. The objective was to get the target group to take avalanche courses and eventually approach lift-accessed “sidecountry” terrain the same as non-lift-accessed backcountry terrain. This initial campaign would be one of many that would target more groups as the organization grew, potentially including snowmobilers and experienced backcountry riders.

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. This initial campaign would be one of many that would target more groups as the organization grew, potentially including snowmobilers and experienced backcountry riders.

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.

Fig. 2: The winning video in the “Know the Snow” video contest was filmed at Wawa Ridge, outside Sunshine Village, Alberta.

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.

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. 3: BCA released a series of videos with support from The Avalanche Project, hosted by BCA freeride athlete Colter Hinchliffe and AIARE instructor/heli guide Lel Tone.

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.](image)

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.