

# A UNIQUE APPROACH TO SELLING AVALANCHE EDUCATION TO TODAY'S YOUNG SNOWSPORT ENTHUSIASTS

Kent Scheler\*, John Bressette, Bill Glude  
Southeast Alaska Avalanche Center, Juneau, Alaska

**ABSTRACT:** Over the last decade an increase in winter recreation activities in the backcountry has been observed in America and Canada. This growth can be attributed not only to an evolution in backcountry equipment, but the influences of "extreme" media trends in current snowsport cultures. Consequently, these countries have also seen a rise in the number of avalanche incidents, with a majority of these accidents involving young snowsport enthusiasts. While avalanche education is an effective way to educate young enthusiasts about avalanche safety, an effective way to sell this education to young user groups is still missing. This project proposes a creative, and possibly effective way to sell the "idea" of avalanche education to young adults through lifestyle documentary filmmaking.

**KEYWORDS:** avalanche education, young adults, media trends, documentary film.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

It has been documented over the last 10 years that winter activities such as snow machining, snowboarding, and skiing have grown in popularity and as they have grown so have backcountry avalanche fatalities (Chabot, 2002; Harvey, 2002; Tschirky et al., 2000). Advancements in equipment and an increase in media exposure have increased the lure of backcountry riding, especially with young adults (Tremper, 2001; Mills, 2002).

Current trends within the snow sports industry have influenced people to push the limits of snow sports in avalanche-prone settings. Recent statistics show the age range of most people caught by avalanches is 17 to 30 years. Most of the people getting caught have little or no avalanche education (Signorell, 2001; Harvey et al., 2002; Tremper, 2001). Avalanche education is the most likely way to reduce the youth avalanche fatality rate. Avalanche education has been quite successful in reaching some backcountry user groups, but it has been less effective in reaching young adults and snowmobilers (Signorell, 2001; Harvey et al., 2002; Tremper, 2001). Avalanche education is the most likely way to reduce the youth avalanche fatality rate. Avalanche education has been quite successful in reaching some backcountry user groups, but it has been less effective in reaching young adults and snowmobilers.

---

\* *Corresponding author address:* Kent Scheler, Southeast Alaska Avalanche Center, Juneau, AK 99802; tel: 907-563-2258; email: kent.scheler@gmail.com

Fatalities among snowmobile riders and young adult snowboarders and skiers ages 14 to 30 have increased in the last five years. These victims are typically white males whose skiing or riding skill development far outpaces their development of avalanche and backcountry skills (Harvey et al., 2002; Tremper, 2001).

These trends indicate that there are holes in the system for delivering avalanche education to young riders. Our message is not reaching them. We need a way to creatively sell young riders on the value of pursuing avalanche training so they can learn better risk management in the mountains. We believe that documentary film using current snowsports media trends is viable as a way to effectively sell avalanche education to young adults.

## 2.0 THE IDEA

The goal of this project is an entertaining, attention-grabbing 30-45 minute lifestyle documentary film keeping with the current models used in ski, snowboard, and snowmachine cultures. This film will document top professional and other backcountry users preaching and practicing good backcountry skills.

The snow sports industry already uses elite athletes to sell products. We propose to sell avalanche education the same way.

The theme will be to document what each rider perceives as the risks of their sports and the ways they maintain a healthy balance

between risk and reward. In keeping with that concept, the title of this film is *Equilibrium: the Search for Balance*.

We believe that the key to effectively sell avalanche education to a broader audience is to not just make another avalanche education film, but instead to feature development of avalanche skills as an essential component of being a complete backcountry rider. The film would cover the entire backcountry risk management skill set with avalanche skills featured prominently but not exclusively. The core message is that complete backcountry riders must possess a sense of the environment in which they play and that education is an effective path to that completeness.

### 3.0 THE FACTS

Since most media coverage of skiing, snowboarding, and snowmachining focuses on the so-called “extreme” aspects of those sports, these are the images that fuel and motivate the minds of today’s young sport enthusiasts. Current snow sport demographic studies indicate that most young riders are inspired to achieve an “extreme” image when practicing their respective sports. These images are sold to the general users through magazines, videos, and now even video games.

In these media, featured industry-sponsored athletes take great risk to entertain the audience and push the performance envelope. Mills et al. (2002) reviewed 900 images from popular sport specific magazines and found the most common images to be of an “extreme”, high-risk nature. These images typically involved airborne tricks off jumps or cliff drops in areas that appeared to be out of bounds. This not only sells products, but it also glorifies an “extreme” life style, one that can be particularly attractive to young aspiring riders.

Avalanche educator Bruce Tremper describes media exposure that gives a Hollywood or “Rock Star” allure to backcountry snowsports as a part of the problem. In his book, *Staying Alive in Avalanche Terrain* (2001), he describes “images of elite athletes in remote mountains, stunning scenery, on the edge of their sport, and almost always in dangerous avalanche terrain, yet almost never shown wearing shovels, turning on their beacons, or digging snowpits”.

It is these elite athletes who dictate the cultural direction of snow sports and lay foundations for many young aspiring athletes. Mills et al (2002) stated that one third of snowboarders interviewed believed that the really inspirational riders are the ones who take the most chances. It seems only logical that these industry icons might also be able to influence young riders to seek avalanche education.

Sandra Mills and others (Mills et al 2002) interviewed over 2000 youths in Canada who alpine ski, snowboard, cross country ski and, snowmobile. They found that safety messages were most effectively delivered by peers and role models who were experienced in their sports, and by traumatic injury survivors. This project will use role models and survivors to deliver the message.

Tremper (2001) describes the backcountry as no longer an elitist’s heaven, but rather a slaughter ground for the inexperienced and uneducated. He explains that while most avalanche victims are very skilled at their sport, their avalanche skills usually lag far behind their sport skills. This cannot be more pronounced than with young riders, who in Mills’ et al. (2002) study, stated they found emotional rewards of going out of bounds, expressing that it is a cool, challenging, exciting and appealingly risky. Young riders not only find excitement beyond the ski hill boundaries, but danger as well. They are greatly influenced by peer pressure and media exposure to the lure of untracked powder, while the underlying risks are seldom portrayed (Ritchie et al., 2002).

In addition, young riders’ undeveloped avalanche evaluation and decision making skills give them a false sense of security. Tremper (2001) describes this as the “ignorance-is-bliss” stage of avalanche knowledge. It is the stage where people jump into avalanche slopes and with little or no awareness of the risk they are taking. This is entirely true for young riders, who often charge slopes with images of glory brewed up by videos and magazines on their minds. They are driven to live out their fantasies, impress themselves, and impress their friends, even though the majority of them are unprepared to evaluate and deal with those risks. While many of the youth surveyed by Mills et al. (2002) indicated that their sport was dangerous, citing falling or hitting something as main sources of injury, only six percent of

snowboarders and skiers specifically identified going out of bounds as a dangerous activity. McCammon (2002), has been studying the human decision making process in evaluating and balancing risk with reward. He studied heuristic decision-making traps that catch avalanche victims. Heuristics are unconscious rules of thumb that people use as decision-making shortcuts. He identified familiarity, social proof, consistency, and scarcity as heuristic traps that avalanche victims are susceptible to. It is likely that the effect of these traps is more amplified in youths because they have little experience to counter the influence of simple heuristics.

The familiarity heuristic suggests that more times a rider does an activity without consequence, the more they assume it is safe. The social proof heuristic indicates that an activity is correct if others are also engaged in it. The consistency heuristic drives people to pursue goals that have been decided on without questioning or reevaluating the decision. The scarcity heuristic drives people to seek to acquire resources they perceive to be in limited supply.

While all of these heuristics are useful and appropriate in everyday life, they can become decision-making traps in the backcountry. McCammon (2004, oral communication) notes that advertising industry studies indicate that education about heuristic traps is effective against getting caught by them.

#### 4.0 THE CURRENT APPROACH

Education must be carefully targeted. While statistics indicate that avalanche education can be effective, not all programs are.

McCammon (2004) explored the success of other campaigns aimed at reducing risky activities in young people. These activities included drug use, unsafe driving, and unprotected sex among teens. It was found that most of programs either met with limited success or in some cases worsened the problem they were intended to solve. He found that a common feature of campaigns that fail is that they incorrectly assume that their targets will react to information by behaving more conservatively.

The campaigns that succeed focus on risk management, and they provide recipients with simple tools like risk ladders and

mitigation measures. While most of these elements are available to avalanche educators, we still need to “sell” young individuals on seeking avalanche education in the first place.

Creative and entertaining films have been used to promote avalanche awareness among young people. In 2002 the Swiss Federal Institute for Snow and Avalanche Research (SLF) produced a 15-minute video to appeal to young people. This instructive video focused on the following questions:

- How can you inform your self about the actual avalanche situation?
- How do you behave at the different danger levels in off-piste terrain?

This video was on display at the 2002 International Snow Science Workshop and received good reviews. It featured well-known European protagonists who relayed to the viewer the importance of acting appropriately for each avalanche danger level in the forecast. The risk ladder and means to reduce risk were clearly presented, in keeping with the features of successful programs identified by McCammon. But watching a video may not be enough to ensure that viewers will act conservatively. It would be more valuable to steer viewers to avalanche classes where they will be able to practice and develop decision-making skills in the field with appropriate modeling, coaching, and supervision.

Craig Gordon of the Utah Avalanche Center has developed an excellent short video that teases the interest of the viewer. His action-packed video *Know Before You Go* is used to pique the interest of young viewers as the lead-in for an avalanche awareness presentation by a professional avalanche educator. Gordon created the video in collaboration with many of the popular film and media companies such as Teton Gravity Research (TGR) and Match Stick Productions (MSP), who produce videos young riders respect. This collaboration gives Gordon's film an energy that young riders can easily relate to.

Tapping this energy might just be the key to selling avalanche education to young riders in North America, exactly what we plan for this project. We want to collaborate with the snow sports industry to create a film that will stoke the young viewer with the idea that

seeking all around mountain education is an essential stepping stone to becoming an elite BACKCOUNTRY rider; not because they have to but because they want to do what their idols are doing.

Tschirky, F., Brabec, B. and Kern, M. 2000. Avalanche rescue systems in Switzerland: experience and limitations. *Proc. Int'l Snow Science Workshop*, Big Sky MT, Oct. 2000, pp. 1-6.

## 5.0 REFERENCES

Chabot, D. 2002. Avalanche Education for Snowmobilers: Efforts of the Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center, *Proc. Int'l Snow Science Workshop*, Penticton B.C., Oct. 2002, pp. 237-241.

Hervey, S. 2002. Avalanche Education Video of the Five European Avalanche Danger Levels, *Proc. Int'l Snow Science Workshop*, Penticton B.C., Oct. 2002, pp. 242-243.

McCammon, I. 2002. Evidence of Heuristic Traps in Recreational Avalanche Accidents, *Proc. Int'l Snow Science Workshop*, Penticton B.C., Oct. 2002, pp. 244-251.

McCammon, I. 2004. Sex, Drugs, and the White Death: Lesson for Avalanche Educators from Health and Safety Campaigns, *Proc. Int'l Snow Science Workshop*, Jackson Hole WY, Oct. 2004.

Miller, S. et al. 2002. SNOWSMART: Communicating snow risk management to Canada's youth, *Proc. Int'l Snow Science Workshop*, Penticton B.C., Oct. 2002, pp. 266-268.

Signorell, C. 2001. Skifahrerlawinenunfalle in den Schweizer Alpen. Eine Auswertung der letzten 30 Jahre. Diplomarbeit Eidg. Institut für Schnee- und Lawinenforschung, SLF, Davos. Translated online.

Ritchie, D. and Spear, P. 2002. SNOWSMART: Research findings on Canadian youth attitudes to risk, *Proc. Int'l Snow Science Workshop*, Penticton B.C., Oct. 2002, pp. 269-272.

Tremper, B. 2001. *Staying Alive in Avalanche Terrain*, The mountaineers, Seattle, WA. pp. 9-19.