

## Safety is Freedom

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper shows how a group of mountain and business professionals are combining avalanche safety awareness, education and information with modern presentation and marketing techniques. Henry's Avalanche Talk (HAT) is a business that aims to help off-piste skiers and boarders learn how to have fun and stay safe by providing high quality talks, courses and web-based information products. Henry Schniewind began giving multi-media avalanche talks in Val d'Isère, France in 1989 before creating HAT in 2002 in response to a growing demand for avalanche safety and awareness from snow sports enthusiasts on vacation, seasonal staff and aspiring professionals. There are now several presenters, instructors and business professionals involved. Their mission is to engage the regular snow sports enthusiast who does not always appreciate the need to learn about safety by emphasising that learning how to stay safe actually helps you have more fun. They have invested in easy-to-understand communications **and** the marketing side of the endeavour. They have found that avalanche education does not escape the basic laws that apply to anyone who wants to convey a particular message to another human being i.e. they have to promote their message. In the past year over 3,000 people have attended HAT talks and 20,000 have visited the related websites. The overall goal of this paper is to encourage debate on the subject of how to engage the public in understanding avalanche awareness and mountain safety.

**KEYWORDS:** Avalanche, Off-piste, Off piste, Awareness, Education, Safety

### 1 BASIC AVALANCHE AWARENESS FOR THE PUBLIC

*The ultimate practical outcome of avalanche theory is accident prevention.*

This logic is what led to the first weekly avalanche awareness presentations or 'talks' in Val d'Isère starting at the end of the season of 1988-89. It was a practical attempt to inform the public on basic avalanche awareness by distilling theory into something that people could understand and use to help prevent an accident. The need for this type of basic awareness became apparent as several tragic accidents (Figure 1) and close calls were observed near the *piste* (marked trail) in that year and subsequent years. The victims under the snow in Figure 1 are in fact *off-piste* even though the secured *piste*, a blue run, is only a few metres away.

The victims under the snow in the avalanche in Figure 1 had little or no avalanche awareness.

During an interview with the friends of the victims, it became clear that even a little bit of

awareness might have saved their lives. For example, the victims could have benefited from understanding the connection between the steepness of the slope, the obvious terrain trap, recent avalanche activity on similar slopes, and a relatively high avalanche danger rating (5 on the old French scale of 8). These simple points may seem obvious to professionals, but they are not for the vast majority of people venturing *off piste*.



Figure 1. Accidental avalanches often occur in the unsecured *off-piste* right next to the secured *piste*. The people observing are standing next to a blue run in the Espace Killy in France (J.C. Souillac photo)

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It was within this context that the author continued to present basic avalanche awareness talks each week in Val d'Isère for the next ten seasons. The talks aimed to accommodate the

many local *off-piste* enthusiasts both working in the village and on vacation. The content was supported by two sets of images produced as slide “booklets” by the French ANENA (l’Association Nationale pour l’Etude de la Neige et des Avalanches) and local contributors. Significant support and encouragement was provided by Jean-Louis Tuailon, director at that time, and his team. The following director, François Sivardière, and the ANENA team, continued this support and the latter also played a key role in helping *Henry’s Avalanche Talk* to become recognised by the French snow and avalanche community.

## 2 KEEPING UP WITH AN EVOLVING SPORT



Figure 2. Improved *off-piste* equipment has made learning to ‘ride’ in deep snow easier and quicker (R. Hogg photo).

Until 2002, these avalanche talks were presented weekly and were paid for by a nightclub in Val d’Isère, Dick’s Tea Bar. “Dick’s” wanted to attract an après-ski clientele and make a contribution to the local community. Then in November 2002, *Henry’s Avalanche Talk*, as it had come to be known, became the official business name of an entity aimed at creating a sustainable structure that would accommodate the rapid rise of *off-piste* enthusiasts (or “freeriders”). There had been an observable increase in the number of people venturing *off piste* over the 5 preceding years. It was also apparent that although skiers and snowboarders could now have fun in deep snow more quickly than in the past, their sense of mountain safety was seriously lagging behind. Indeed increased requests for avalanche awareness and education started to appear from these freeriders in French resorts known for their off-piste terrain. A larger view than that of a ‘one-man-show’ had to be created to deal with the organisational, financial and quality issues that occurred; a team approach was adopted.

Since 2002, eight members of the *Henry’s Avalanche Talk* (HAT) team have given live avalanche awareness talks (mostly in English<sup>ii</sup>) to a total audience of close to 17,000 people at over 500 talks in over a dozen resorts in the Northern French Alps and at venues in the United Kingdom. Of the in-resort totals, people attending are approximately 68% British, 14% Scandinavian, 9% French and 9% diverse nationalities.

## 3 ATTRACTING AND ENGAGING THE PUBLIC

*If people don’t recognise that they need something, then there is little or no motivation to get what is being offered.*

The idea of information and awareness about *off-piste* and avalanche awareness is still a new concept to most people. Many skiers and snowboarders don’t think that there is any need to know about the subject even if they do venture beyond secured areas. Indeed the majority of those surveyed at HAT talks didn’t know that it is usually the victim that triggers the avalanche that carries them away - until after having attended a basic talk. Furthermore, accidental avalanches are relatively rare (Duclos, A., Louchet, F. 2006). Therefore, convincing people to spend their time and money on an avalanche awareness talk can be a challenging exercise.

How then, do you attract and engage an audience? Before looking at some of the solutions that HAT has developed, here is a short summary of what a *HAT basic talk* is:

While HAT now offers a range of courses and presentations, the basic talk<sup>iii</sup> is still the main product and has the most impact on increased public awareness. The HAT basic talk uses audiovisual support (digital images, video and sound), trained speakers and is adapted to local geography and current conditions. In short, it lasts for one hour and focuses on mostly basic points: *where secured areas begin and end, slope angle, recent avalanche activity, the avalanche rating/bulletin, terrain traps etc.* It also includes some references to more abstract points like the role of the *human factor* in leading even experienced people into danger.

Trial and error has been our guide to attracting and engaging an audience. Through this process, we have come to realise that it is interaction between four things, which helps to achieve a successful event: **Quality content and delivery; Promotions; Sponsor and partner support; and a Website presence.**

### 3.1 Quality content and delivery

A standard presentation for all basic talks that can be adapted to the local environment is the most effective model that we have come up with so far. This standard is built upon by:

- Trained speakers with local knowledge and respect in the local community
- A self-sufficient AV system. Being able to set up anywhere and controlling one's own quality of image and sound
- As much emphasis on the fun side of riding *off piste* as is appropriate, carefully balancing education and entertainment throughout the basic talk

### 3.2 Promotions

Several years of promoting the name and "HAT brand" (through mainstream to local media and from stickers to t-shirts) has helped increase awareness about the HAT cause and helped to attract audiences to events as a result. Here are some specific activities that have contributed on the promotional side things:

- A venue that is fully committed to the success of an event will promote a talk to their customers and local community as a high profile event
- Local marketing led by a committed outgoing person, regularly distributing: posters, fliers, stimulating word of mouth and engaging local companies such as tour operators
- Radio announcements and interviews combined with articles and ads about events in local publications has helped a lot with events in the Tarentaise Valley of Savoie.
- Social networking like Facebook and Twitter are starting to show some results.

If efforts of the above type are neglected then most people will not know that the event is taking place – this is especially true in a resort context where people visit the destination in question for only a limited time.

### 3.3 Sponsor and partner support

- Financial support from sponsors has been essential in order to make up for the 25%-50% deficit that often arises between direct entry fees (€6-€8 per person) and the rest of the costs of the event (travel, AV equipment etc.).
- *Partners* are defined here as organisations that benefit from being involved with the event and add value themselves but don't contribute direct financial support. An example of a successful partner is a ski club with

a large membership who is interested in the subject, and who will provide a sponsor with valuable advertising reach (to its members for example). *Venues* of course are important partners and those who commit to paying a minimum fee for a talk have almost always been valuable promotional partners.

### 3.4 Web presence

Communicating avalanche awareness through live contact with our audience is a top priority, but we've found that the potential of on-line communication cannot be ignored. For example, [henrysavalanchetalk.com](http://henrysavalanchetalk.com) provides free advice on how to stay safe and have fun *off piste*. For example, there is a free weekly "E-zine" that reports on current topics of debate, safety tips, new products and new approaches to safety, as well as, current snow and weather conditions in the Northern French Alps. Further information and debate can be accessed through our blog, [getoffpiste.com](http://getoffpiste.com). Having a list of people, who have voluntarily signed up to receive information helps to get the word out about avalanche awareness and upcoming events too. There are currently over 2,000 people who have signed up to receive the "HAT E-zine".

Having a web presence also allows for a more personal touch: striving to be closer to local mountain communities by allowing local HAT speakers to build on geographically focused blogs is a creative way to engage the individual and increase avalanche awareness on the local level too. This approach is currently being explored in a few resorts through [getoffpiste.com](http://getoffpiste.com).

## 4 CONCLUSION

Increased quality avalanche education and awareness for the public is an important practical need facing the international snow and avalanche science community. Engaging the public through exciting events and professional promotional campaigns are a way of passing important information, awareness and education on to the public not only about safety, but about the subject of snow and avalanches as a whole. HAT has provided live avalanche awareness talks to a total audience of close to 17,000 since 2002. Our goal is to increase those numbers to an attendance of 15,000 people at live talks each year and 30,000 via on-line talks yearly by the end of 2012. Additional combining of live events with on-line support is a priority as we move forward. For example, a new on-line version of the basic talk (coming out this autumn 2009 on [henrysavalanchetalk.com](http://henrysavalanchetalk.com)) will reach people who

have not been able to attend talks while giving people who have attended, a chance to review the content of a basic talk.

There are still many challenges around effectively providing basic avalanche awareness services. There are business challenges and there are challenges regarding effective communication: especially amongst a new generation of fairly experienced individuals who are making basic, but costly mistakes that too often lead to tragic accidents. We hope to further explore, debate and solve these and other shared challenges (and successes) with other members of the international snow and avalanche community.

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<sup>i</sup> For this paper, *Off-piste* and *Off piste* is defined as: lift access off-trail skiing in mostly unsecured, but not restricted, areas (very little hiking involved in accessing the targeted terrain). Avalanche awareness for *off-piste* skiing and snowboarding is the focus of this paper, with France as the country of reference. However, we suspect that many parallels can be drawn between *off-piste* skiing practices in France and other Alpine countries. *Off-piste* attracts hundreds (often thousands) of skiers and snowboarders each day in an average size French resort – most are uneducated about avalanche safety and ill- or even unequipped. It should also be noted that the vast majority of avalanche victims in France are skiers and snowboarders either *off-piste* or ski touring or *randonnée* (Jarry, 2000-2009). A significant amount of touring practiced today is an extended form of *off-piste* (thanks to modern 'alpine touring' boots and bindings) and also aided by lift access.

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<sup>ii</sup> Roughly one third of avalanche victims in France are non-French.

<sup>iii</sup> The target audience of a HAT "basic talk" is a combination of: people on vacation (or in-resort 'holiday makers'), seasonal staff living in-resort and aspiring professionals.