

**PEER AMBASSADORS AT WORK:
MODELING GOOD DECISION-MAKING IN “AGGRO” FREERIDE FILMS**

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ABSTRACT: Aggressive freeride films from Teton Gravity Research, Matchstick Productions, and many others influence hundreds of thousands of young skiers and snowboarders every year. Rowdy big mountain athletes charge big lines, send big airs, and are sometimes shown outrunning avalanches. Does this “aggro” behavior send the right message to young, impressionable riders?

Backcountry Access (BCA) performed a survey through its social media channels in 2018 to determine how freeride films affect the behavior of skiers, snowboarders, and snowmobilers. The results indicate that 51 percent of recreationists and 93 percent of professionals believe that freeride films affect the behavior of skiers, snowboarders, and snowmobilers in the backcountry. In fact, 31 percent of professionals confirmed that they have rescued individuals that said they were trying to imitate something they saw in a freeride film. And 94 percent of professionals agree that including avalanche safety content in freeride films would likely cause riders to modify their backcountry behavior.

Based on these trends, BCA shifted its sponsorship budget in 2018 toward developing a series of videos that show the “other side” of freeride films, including the avalanche safety and decision-making process behind these aggressive segments. Entitled “Send and Return,” the BCA three-part video series not only shows well-respected athletes riding aggressively, but also shows them evaluating avalanche conditions and planning their tours according to the avalanche conditions. In these films, the athletes demonstrate how to execute safe travel protocols including trailhead tests, traveling one at a time, performing snow stability tests, and communicating clearly about the trip plan. And after they are filmed “sending” radical lines in big mountain terrain, they are always shown safely returning at the end of the day.

The “Send and Return” project enabled BCA to deploy its newly recruited roster of athletes and peer ambassadors to influence the target audience. This communication strategy grew out of BCA’s involvement with The Avalanche Project and a study commissioned by that organization that concluded that “peer to peer” communication is the most effective way to modify the behavior of young, aggressive riders.

The BCA “Send and Return” video series debuts in the autumn of 2018 and will be distributed through various social media channels, via YouTube, and at www.backcountryaccess.com.

KEYWORDS: Avalanche safety, freeriding, freeskiing, skiing, snowboarding, snowmobiling, backcountry, filmmaking, social media

1. BACKGROUND

As a company founded by freeskiers, BCA has always been a supporter of freeride films and competitions, usually with an educational component to its partnerships. BCA representatives have helped train and equip the

athletes and production teams. In the early years, BCA even sponsored safety segments on the “DVD extras” that came with each DVD. With the advent of social media channels including YouTube, Vimeo, Instagram and Facebook, it has become easier for BCA to distribute video content outside conventional means such as DVD’s and film tours. This widespread access to social media audiences has created opportunities for manufacturers to create their own content instead of relying on film producers and their own distribution networks. Since avalanche safety doesn’t quite “sell” as readily as aggressive freeriding, producers rarely include avalanche safety content in their films.

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This prompted BCA to create its own series of short videos in 2018 that could be distributed through today's well-developed social media channels.

To test these ideas, BCA distributed a survey to the backcountry community through e-mail and social media channels, to determine if freeride films affect the behavior of skiers, snowboarders, and snowmobilers—and whether including safety content could have a positive effect on their behavior. This BCA survey, entitled “Are You Under the Influence (of Ski & Sled Films)?” can be found in the Appendix.

The video project was partially influenced by research commissioned by The Avalanche Project, a former consortium of ski industry stakeholders with a mission to develop consistent snow safety messaging across North America. Focus groups hosted by Kruse Consulting concluded that “peer-to-peer”—rather than “top-down”—communication is the most effective way to influence young, aggressive off-piste riders (Kruse et.al. 2014). In response, in 2015, BCA created a team of respected young athletes with large social media followings and required them all to have a minimum of Level 1 avalanche training. These athletes were asked to produce content on their social media channels that occasionally includes a safety message. Several of these athletes are featured in BCA's “Send and Return” series.

2. SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

A total of 1,370 people completed the BCA survey. The makeup of the survey participant group is characterized as follows.

- 10 percent of survey participants were 25 years old or younger, 41 percent of survey participants were 26-40 years old, and 49 percent of survey participants were 41 years or older.
- 31 percent of participants typically spend ten days or less in the backcountry, 24 percent spend 11-20 days in the backcountry, and 45 percent spend over 20 days each season in the backcountry.
- 69 percent of participants identified as a skier or snowboarder, and 31 percent identified as a snowmobiler (or both snowmobiler and skier/snowboarder).

ARE YOU A SKIER/SNOWBOARDER, A SNOWMOBILER (SLEDDER) OR BOTH?

■ SKIER/SNOWBOARDER
■ SNOWMOBILER
■ BOTH - FREERIDER/SLEDDER

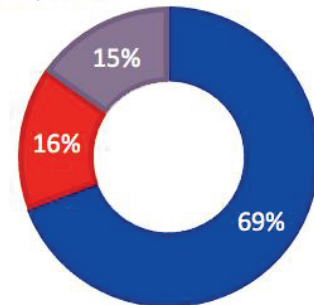


Figure 1. Distribution of survey participants, by activity.

WHAT LEVEL OF AVALANCHE SAFETY TRAINING DO YOU HAVE?

■ NEVER TAKEN A COURSE
■ AVALANCHE AWARENESS COURSE (REC)
■ LEVEL 1 REC
■ LEVEL 2 REC
■ PRO COURSE(S)

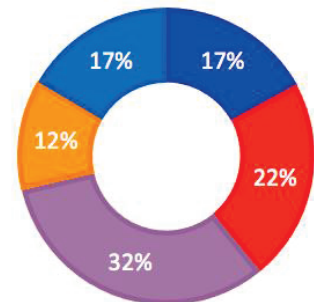


Figure 2. Level of avalanche training among survey participants.

- 75 percent of the survey participants self-identified as a recreationist (recreational backcountry skier, snowboarder or snowmobiler) and 25 percent of survey participants self-identified as a professional (professional guide, ski patrol or educator).

3. SURVEY RESULTS

There were several key findings in the survey:

- Of the recreationists surveyed, 51 percent said that watching freeride films influences their behavior in the backcountry. 49 percent said freeride films don't affect their backcountry behavior—close to an even split.
- While 62 percent of recreational riders stated that they have entered into backcountry terrain similar to what they'd

seen in a freeride film, 11.5 percent reported that they had entered into such terrain during “questionable” avalanche conditions specifically to ride in terrain and conditions similar to what they’d seen in these films.

- Of the snow professionals surveyed, 55 percent said they’d had guests ask them to teach them tricks or take them to terrain similar to what they’d seen in a freeride film. 31 percent said they’ve had to rescue someone who said they’d tried a trick or entered into terrain to imitate something they saw in a freeride film.
- Among these pros, 93 percent said they thought freeride films affect the behavior of recreationists; 7 percent said they didn’t think so. Consistent with these results, 96 percent of professionals said they thought recreationists are “somewhat” or “extremely” more likely to take additional risks in the backcountry than if they had not seen freeride films. Six percent said they didn’t think this was the case.

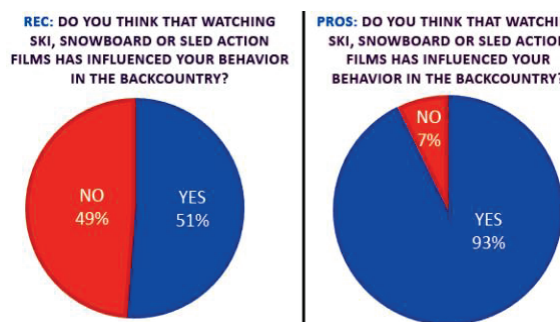


Figure 3. Recreationist versus professional perspectives on the influence of freeride films.

- Of the professionals surveyed, 94 percent said they thought recreationists were “somewhat” or “extremely” likely to modify their behavior if avalanche safety segments were shown within freeride films. Six percent said it was unlikely.

4. “SEND AND RETURN” VIDEO SERIES

Over the winter and spring of 2018, BCA commissioned several of its athletes and ambassadors to create the three-part BCA “Send and Return” video series that includes avalanche safety messaging in addition to aggressive skiing, snowboarding, and

snowmobiling footage. The series consists of one video featuring backcountry skiers and snowboarders, one video featuring hybrid skiers/snowmobilers, and one video featuring only snowmobilers. The videos were filmed and edited by Ben Goertzen of Red Yeti Productions, Riley Leboe of Seeking Nirvana, and Jim Phelan of Thunderstruck Films, respectively. Each video includes segments showing athletes checking the avalanche bulletin, planning their tour, performing a transceiver trailhead test, riding one at a time, performing appropriate stability tests, and returning to the trailhead at the end of the day. And, of course, they all include aggressive riding footage, including eye-catching aerial maneuvers.

“Send and Return” will debut in the autumn of 2018. It will be distributed via social media and will be downloadable at www.backcountryaccess.com.

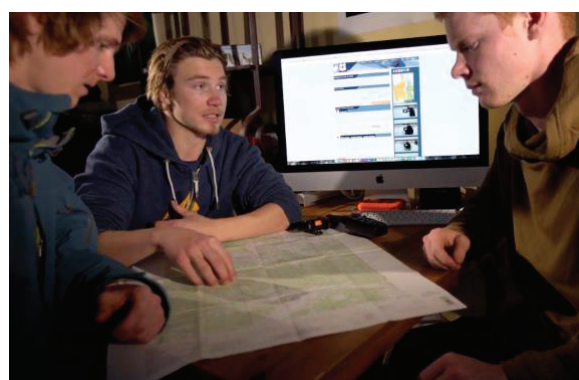


Figure 4. BCA athletes Stu Edgerly, Dylan Zellers, and Ben Goertzen discuss their tour plan at the beginning of episode 1 of BCA’s “Send and Return” video series.



Figure 5. Goertzen measures slope angle while filming “Send and Return” in the Madison Range of southwestern Montana.



Figure 6. Goertzen, a former freeride competitor, tosses a front flip for the camera.

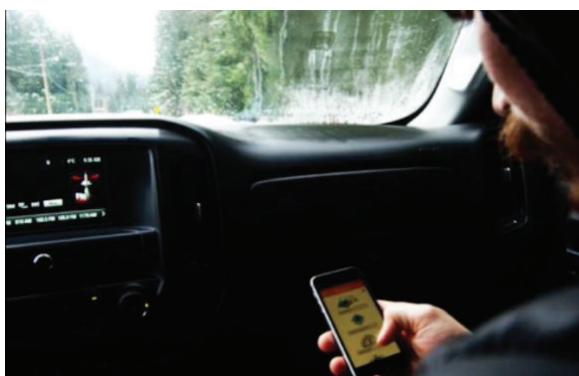


Figure 7. Seeking Nirvana athlete Mike Henitiuk checks the avalanche forecast while traveling in Stewart, BC in the hybrid ski/snowmobile episode of "Send and Return."



Figure 8. Thunderstruck athlete Cody Hunt jumps a wind lip outside Alpine, WY in the snowmobile episode of "Send and Return."

5. CONCLUSION

Modern video production equipment, editing software and social media distribution channels have made it possible for manufacturers and other educators to push content out to consumers on their own instead of relying on established filmmakers and their distributors. While aggressive freeride films have undoubtedly helped expose and push the limits of backcountry skiing, snowboarding, and snowmobiling, they have not provided viewers with good role modeling about tour planning and backcountry decision-making. By creating its own "Send and Return" series of web-friendly freeride videos, BCA has been able to include an accompanying avalanche safety message along with compelling riding footage. Considering the results of our public survey, we believe that these videos will help modify the behavior of aggressive freeriders, prompting them to take avalanche safety courses and select their riding terrain according to the regional avalanche forecast. Using well-respected athletes and peer ambassadors as role models in these videos is more likely to change behavior than using traditional "top-down" communication methods.

REFERENCES

R. Kruse, D. Atkins, A. Carlson, M. Clayton, P. Diegel, B. Edgerly, B. Lazar, T. Murphy, B. Pritchett, S. Schell, and B. Tremper, 2014: Changing Beliefs, Knowledge, and Behaviors to Make Snow Safety Stick. *Proceedings of the International Snow Science Workshop*, Banff, AB, Canada.

APPENDIX

International Snow Science Workshop, we've created this survey to discover the influence of ski, snowboard and sled action movies on backcountry riders - whether in theaters or on social media. Please answer the questions below (8-10 questions, less than five minutes.)

GENERAL - ANSWERS

1 How old are you?

Answer

<18 years old

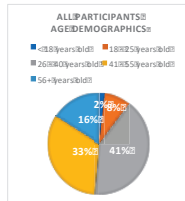
18-24 years old

25-30 years old

31-35 years old

36+ years old

Number/Responses	Ratio
24	1.8%
112	8.6%
538	40.9%
530	33.0%
212	15.8%
1364	100.0%



2 How many days do you typically spend in the backcountry in a season?

Answer

<5 days

6-10 days

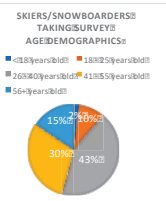
11-20 days

21-30 days

31-40 days

41+ days

Number/Responses	Ratio
131	14.1%
226	16.6%
324	23.8%
241	17.7%
131	9.8%
242	18.1%
1364	100.0%



3 How likely would you say you are to take risks in the backcountry on a regular basis?

Answer

UNLIKELY

SOMEWHAT LIKELY

EXTREMELY LIKELY

Ratio

46.2%

51.1%

6.1%

1364

100.0%

Response	Percentage
UNLIKELY	46.2%
SOMEWHAT LIKELY	51.1%
EXTREMELY LIKELY	6.1%

4 What level of avalanche safety training do you have? (Check the highest level you have completed)

Answer

NEVER TAKEN A COURSE

AVANCE COURSE

LEVEL 1 REC

LEVEL 2 REC

PRO COURSE(S)

Number/Responses	Ratio
236	1.8%
201	22.0%
442	32.1%
155	12.1%
226	16.5%
1359	84.4%
1364	100.0%

Training Level	Percentage
NEVER TAKEN A COURSE	1.8%
AVANCE COURSE	22.0%
LEVEL 1 REC	32.1%
LEVEL 2 REC	12.1%
PRO COURSE(S)	16.5%

5 Are you a skier/snowboarder, a snowmobiler/sledder, or both?

Answer

SKIER/SNOWBOARDER

SNOWMOBILER

BOTH SKIER/SLEDDER

Number/Responses	Ratio
945	69.0%
211	15.4%
208	15.1%
1364	100.0%

Activity	Percentage
SKIER/SNOWBOARDER	69.0%
SNOWMOBILER	15.4%
BOTH SKIER/SLEDDER	15.1%

6 Have you ever watched a backcountry safety educational video online or as part of a formal training class?

Answer

YES

NO

Number/Responses	Ratio
1131	82.9%
233	17.1%
1364	100.0%

7 Are you a PRO-professional guide, ski patrol, educator or REC-recreational backcountry skier, snowboarder or sledder?

Answer

PRO

REC

Number/Responses	Ratio
248	25.5%
2016	74.5%
1364	100.0%

REC ANSWERS

8 Have you ever watched a ski, snowmobile or sled action movie?

Answer

YES

NO

Number/Responses	Ratio
264	97.0%
8	3.0%
1012	100.0%

9 Have you tried to imitate a move or trick that you saw in a ski, snowboard or sled action movie?

Answer

YES

NO

Number/Responses	Ratio
536	55.0%
436	45.0%
972	100.0%

10 Yes, what types of backcountry riding tricks have you tried that you saw in a ski, snowboard or sled action movie? (Select one or more)

Answer

360° rotation in the air

Jumping or dropping off a cliff

Fast steep descents

Pillow landing

Riding tail style

Backflips

Sledding

High marking

Sideline

Riding through trees

Other

Number/Responses	Ratio
226	11.1%
260	17.8%
222	14.4%
114	5.6%
81	4.1%
82	4.0%
115	5.7%
100	7.8%
332	17.4%
18	0.9%
2028	100.0%

WHAT TYPE OF BACKCOUNTRY RIDING TRICKS HAVE YOU TRIED TO IMITATE THAT YOU SAW IN A SKI, SNOWBOARD OR SLED ACTION FILM?

Answer

360° rotation in the air

Jumping or dropping off a cliff

Fast steep descents

Pillow landing

Riding tail style

Backflips

Sledding

High marking

Sideline

Riding through trees

Other

Ratio

11.1%

17.8%

14.4%

5.6%

4.1%

4.0%

5.7%

7.8%

17.4%

0.9%

100.0%

11 OPTIONAL: What was the most advanced move or trick you've tried that imitated something you saw in a ski, snowboard or sled movie? Tell us about it! What were the conditions, the slope aspect and features, location, how many riding with you, and other circumstances? (1000 characters or less)

View Test Results

12 Have you ever entered into the backcountry to ride terrain similar to something you saw in a ski, snowboard or sled action film?

Answer

YES

NO

Number/Responses	Ratio
302	62.5%
180	37.5%
931	100.0%

13 Have you ever gone out during questionable avalanche conditions because you wanted to ride in terrain and conditions similar to something you saw in a ski, snowboard or sled action film?

Answer

YES

NO

Number/Responses	Ratio
107	11.5%
824	88.5%
931	100.0%

14 Have you ever filmed in the backcountry because you wanted to get footage like something you saw in a ski, snowboard or sled action film?

Answer

YES

NO

Number/Responses	Ratio
226	29.6%
555	70.4%
931	100.0%

15 Do you think that watching ski, snowboard or sled action films has influenced your behavior in the backcountry?

Answer

YES

NO

Number/Responses	Ratio
422	51.2%
404	48.8%
931	100.0%

PRO ANSWERS

16 In your professional opinion, do ski, snowboard and sled action movies EXERT INFLUENCE on backcountry behavior?

Answer

YES

NO

Number/Responses	Ratio
306	92.7%
24	7.3%
330	100.0%

17 In your professional opinion, how likely would a recreational rider TAKE ADDITIONAL RISKS as a result of watching ski, snowboard and sled action movies?

Answer

UNLIKELY

SOMEWHAT LIKELY

EXTREMELY LIKELY

Number/Responses	Ratio
14	4.2%
219	66.4%
97	29.4%
330	100.0%

18 In your professional opinion, how likely would a recreational rider be TO MODIFY their risk-taking behavior if shown avalanche safety education segments within ski, snowboard and sled action movies?

Answer

UNLIKELY

SOMEWHAT LIKELY

EXTREMELY LIKELY

Number/Responses	Ratio
19	5.8%
212	70.3%
72	23.9%
330	100.0%

19 Has a guest ever asked you to show them how to do a specific trick or take them to terrain similar to what they've seen in a ski, snowboard or sled movie?

Answer

YES

NO

Number/Responses	Ratio
181	54.8%
149	45.2%
330	100.0%

20 Have you ever rescued someone who said they had tried a trick or ventured onto terrain to imitate something they saw in a ski, snowboard or sled movie?

Answer

YES

NO

Number/Responses	Ratio
102	30.9%
228	69.1%
330	100.0%

1510