SHOW, DON'T TELL: MODELLING BEHAVIOUR ON SOCIAL MEDIA AS A STRATEGY FOR INFLUENCING BEHAVIOUR IN DATA SPARSE REGIONS

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ABSTRACT: Avalanche Canada has traditionally produced avalanche bulletins as a flagship product that aims to communicate avalanche hazard and associated risk mitigation strategies to winter backcountry users. While many people diligently use avalanche bulletins to inform their backcountry decisions, there are some mountain communities for which this traditional product has only limited reach and effectiveness. In 2015 Avalanche Canada began experimenting with a new communication strategy using social media in a data sparse region where the primary user group is mountain snowmobilers. A set of social media communication guidelines were designed to create engagement, build trust, promote brand recognition and model behaviour for our target audience. The new program adopted a *Show, Don't Tell* strategy for communicating avalanche hazard and risk. The core element of this approach revolves around modelling how Avalanche Canada field staff manage their own exposure/vulnerability and make decisions according to the given avalanche hazard instead of a traditional expert-driven, "top down" approach of telling people what they should, and should not do. This paper uses the framework of Social and Behaviour Change Communication models for an evidence based approach to reviewing our program and setting new goals. Through this lens we examine the achievements and challenges of influencing behaviour using social media.

KEYWORDS: social media, forecasting, data sparse, public safety, risk communication

1. INTRODUCTION

What if you and everyone you recreated with were asked to change your behaviour in the backcountry? What if the change required was in conflict with the way you had always behaved in the mountains? McCammon (2004) and Duncan & Stewart-Patterson (2016) have suggested that personal health choices and personal backcountry recreation choices have similarities in structure. This lead us to look at Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) models for guidance since using SBCC theory to systematically frame program design has led to desirable outcomes in a variety of public health domains (Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs, 2018). We have used the structure of SBCC program implementation kits to review and further design a social media initiative aimed at the mountain snowmobile community.

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2. SITUATION ANALYSIS

Avalanche Canada field operations in the South Rockies region commenced in 2009, following a significant fatal avalanche accident involving eight mountain snowmobilers from the small industry community of Sparwood, BC. A British Columbia Coroners Service (2009) report concluded that many mountain snowmobilers involved in avalanche accidents throughout British Columbia had not checked the public avalanche bulletin. (*Findings and Recommendations of a Death Review Panel*, 2009) The report urged all stakeholders to find ways to improve avalanche safety within the mountain snowmobile community.

A primary goal for the South Rockies field team was to reach and influence the local snowmobile community. Discussions with snowmobilers in the backcountry revealed that:

- Avalanche Canada was perceived as a "skier-centric" organization.
- Avalanche Canada did not provide relatable snowmobile content.
- Avalanche Canada was seen as contributing, in part, to painting mountain snowmobilers in a negative light after accidents, generating defensiveness and mistrust in the snowmobile community.

In 2015 Avalanche Canada developed social media communication guidelines specifically designed to create engagement, build trust, and model behaviour. It was first operationalized in the South Rockies forecast region, and more recently in the data sparse North Rockies region.

3. IDENTIFICATION OF THE CORE PROBLEM

Snowmobilers are over represented in the avalanche fatality statistics. Between 2007 and 2017 mountain snowmobilers made up 47% of avalanche fatality victims with the next biggest group being skiers at 28% (Avalanche Canada, 2017). Backcountry snowmobiling is rapidly growing; for example, the Fernie Snowmobile Association went from 273 memberships sold in 2017 to 503 memberships sold in 2018 (N.Matei, personal correspondence, 2018).

Investigations of accidents and near miss events suggest mountain snowmobilers are accessing avalanche terrain that does not match the given avalanche problems and hazard. In Canada, avalanche forecasts are regional products that cover areas up to 50,000 sq km. With little to no avalanche training, it is challenging to translate these regional overviews into specific terrain choices.

In the North Rockies where data streams cannot support daily public avalanche forecasts, the weekly conditions reports are considered too generic, too repetitious, not engaging, and of limited value (Storm & Helgeson, 2014).

4. DEFINING THE AUDIENCE

The target audience for our regional social media channels are mountain snowmobilers of the North and South Rockies who recreate in avalanche terrain. They are generally skilled riders who access challenging and complex avalanche terrain. Avalanche Canada field staff in the South Rockies have observed that the majority of mountain snowmobilers carry avalanche rescue gear and airbags packs are increasingly worn. Avalanche Skills Training (AST) courses are becoming more popular. Avalanche Canada's AST database reveals a 140% increase in snowmobiler AST course participation over the last 10 years (M. Clayton, personal communication , 2018).

Duncan & Stewart-Patterson (2016) found a mean age of 37 for snowmobilers in a North Rockies survey. 32% of Facebook users following the Mountain Sledder Magazine (a popular enthusiast publication) are between 27 and 34 years of age, 24% are between 35 and 44 years of age. 87% of their followers are male (P.Garbutt, personal communication, 2018).

Avalanche Canada field staff have found that the snowmobilers they interact with are hardworking, community minded people. They want to play hard, but are generally very helpful to others in need. They respect family and want to come home safely every day. They value, and quite possibly require information tailored to them. AST courses taught by mountain snowmobilers, for mountain snowmobilers is one such example.

5. COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVES

The behavior change communication framework suggests using the S.M.A.R.T. acronym to create clearly stated goals and objectives.

Specific

Our main objective is to influence behaviour and risk perception relative to the avalanche hazard. We aim is to reduce avalanche accidents for mountain snowmobilers that are not reached with traditional Avalanche Canada products.

Measurable

Measuring behavior change in backcountry mountain snowmobilers beyond counting fatalities is challenging. We look to social media metrics to ensure that our reach and brand identity continues grow. Feedback from the community and local partners such as snowmobile groups and influencers is important. Insights from field team members help to gauge extent of community support for the work being done.

Appropriate

Considerable effort has been spent with field staff getting to know the target audience to ensure that messaging is tailored to the user group. Respecting the community is essential, and field staff enjoying the sport themselves is critical for effective communication that might influence behaviour. Staff aim for a tone that is fun, engaging and yet still professional. Efforts should be made not to elicit defensiveness.

Realistic

It is realistic to reach and engage more of the mountain snowmobile community in data sparse regions with targeted social media messaging. It is not realistic to reduce accident and fatality rates to zero.

Timebound

The program should be measured against its objectives on an annual basis through end of season reports delivered each spring. The goals are lofty and will be ongoing, but it is important to review the process yearly to ensure we are listening to feedback from staff and the mountain snowmobile community. We need to be sure we are adapting to best practice within the ever changing communication landscape.

6. STRATEGIC APPROACH

Success requires mountain snowmobilers using social media in data sparse areas have the opportunity to interact with Avalanche Canada region specific social media products.

In order to influence behavior in the snowmobile world, it became clear that Avalanche Canada had to change their own behavior first. This process is already under way after gaining knowledge from embedded field staff to guide an appropriate approach. It includes:

- Investing in field staff that enjoy working with snowmobiles as their primary mode of backcountry travel.
- Ensuring staff have the right snowmobiles and gear to "fit in" in a mountain sledding environment.
- Having mountain sledding positively represented with quality photos and video in all Avalanche Canada products.
- Acknowledging and reinforcing good choices and habits being made within the mountain snowmobiling community.
- Getting comfortable with sharing localized snow quality and riding conditions info as a way to attract new audiences to avalanche messaging.
- Using influencers within the mountain snowmobiling community to promote the Avalanche Canada brand and products.

We chose to work with region specific Instagram and Facebook channels which allow for tailored regionalized content. The South Rockies started with Instagram, *@avcansouthrockies*, later implementing a region specific Facebook channel, *Avalanche Canada South Rockies,* in 2016. The North Rockies beta project began mid season in 2018 and chose Instagram, *@avcannorthrockies,* as a manageable first year objective.

In the traditional Avalanche Canada model, people interested in getting regional avalanche information need to have the motivation and brand recognition required to visit the Avalanche Canada website *www.avalanche.ca* to retrieve it. One of the benefits of using social media is risk management messaging is delivered to places such as Instagram and Facebook where the target audience already spends a significant amount of time.

Our research suggests that Facebook is the best fit for the age demographic of mountain snowmobilers ("Facebook: U.S. user age demographics" Statista, 2018). The "sharing" features of Facebook help our messaging hit new audiences to which we may not have regular access.

Instagram is a platform that captures the younger audience and is important for our long term approach of adapting to cultural shifts within the community ("Global Instagram User Age" Statista, 2018). It is a good fit for quality photos and very simple messaging.

7. IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

We built a specific set of communication guidelines for our staff designed to create engagement, build trust, and model behaviour for our target audience. Essentially the program has adopted a *Show, Don't Tell* strategy for communicating avalanche hazard and risk. The core element of this approach revolves around modelling how Avalanche Canada field staff manage their own exposure/vulnerability and make decisions according to the given avalanche hazard instead of the traditional expert-driven approach of telling people what they should, and should not do.

1. Messages should be short and engaging with high quality photos or videos.

Social media channels favor shorter packets of information that work well with time constraints and short attention spans. We aim for videos to be no longer than 1 minute for Instagram and no longer than 1:30 seconds for Facebook. Although instagram and Facebook favor short messages, it is important to link and point to more in depth educational pieces at *www.avalanche.ca*. In this way we are driving more traffic to our webpage and supporting a variety products that may interest mountain snowmobilers at different stages of their avalanche education journey.

Quality/creative, engaging photos and video clips should be used. We cannot communicate with the audience without first capturing their attention. Choose photos and video clips that

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show the problem and solutions vs. having to describe it.

2. Avoid technical language/jargon; messages must be understood by users with no formal avalanche training.

The avalanche industry is rife with jargon and technical subject matter. Health literacy studies suggest that overestimating comprehension of complex topics can lead to poor outcomes, Nutbeam (2000). Instead, we want to speak in plain english so that messaging is understood and facilitates learning for new users, but retains enough value for more experienced users.

3. Highlight a single problem and/or solution.

We have a tendency to try to over-explain and say too much. It is impossible to capture a lifetime of experience in a single social media post. Prioritize the single most important message for a post. When possible, frame messaging in a positive way and offer solutions or management suggestions rather than just pointing out problems.

4. Whenever possible, use "we" language instead of "you" language to avoid lecturing.

Using "we" language implies a shared identification, (Seider et al. 2009). We desire to be respected as *part* of the community rather than *above* it. Avalanche Canada considers the "we" language in social media akin to making deposits in the bank, investing in relationship and trust. If we need to use strong language at special times, we have currency available for withdrawal without bankrupting the relationship.

We accept that everyone has their own risk tolerance which may change over time and with different situations. By using "we" language we can own the risk tolerance that is right for Avalanche Canada, without passing judgement on the decisions of others. This leaves the door open for future positive interactions with audience members wherever they are on the behavior change spectrum.

5. Model what we are thinking about as professionals on a given day and how we are keeping ourselves safe relative to the current hazard.

Since field teams have to manage their risk on snowmobiles each day in the field, it is a great opportunity to model how we are making decisions. Social cognitive theory supports the important role of observational learning through the use of credible role models engaging in desirable behavior (Bandura 2001). Since

consequences drive behavior, and people are more likely to mimic behavior that leads to outcomes of value, it is important to model how good avalanche risk management can lead to fun times riding.
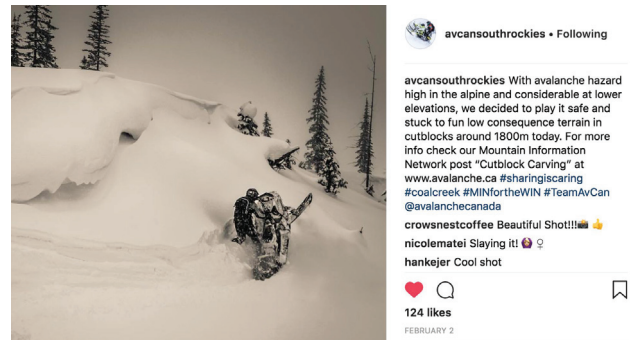

Figure 1: Example Instagram post that incorporates the 5 points in the communication guidelines and references other Avalanche Canada products where they can get more in depth information.

8. MONITOR & EVALUATION

Social media metrics are a quantitative gauge of how our products are resonating with the target audience and to measure growth. While we aim to grow the reach, our regional channel followers will be capped by the number of snowmobilers recreating in each data sparse region. Follows, likes and shares are important metrics, but we need to remember that chasing these things may not be conducive to a professional, educational organization.

The South Rockies Facebook page has 2565 followers amassed in two winters, and 1340 Instagram followers. Post reach is regularly in the thousands, with top posts reaching well over ten thousand views. In January 2018 a Special Public Avalanche Warning (SPAW) video was shared 172 times and reached over 15,000 people.

In only three months the North Rockies trial Instagram program generated 564 followers and delivered 43 posts. After a closer look at social media and snowmobiler demographics generated by this paper and the experience of the South Rockies program, the North Rockies will likely add Facebook next season.

When South Rockies program began, mountain snowmobilers rarely engaged in person with the field teams in the backcountry, they often avoided us. Now mountain snowmobilers regularly approach us in the field to share information, talk about our social media posts and how they influenced their decision making, and ask us further questions.

Another indicator of program effectiveness is that we see local snowmobile influencers and

clubs in the region sharing our messaging, and starting to promote avalanche safety messages of their own in a similar style to Avalanche Canada's.

Grassroots support indicates we are improving relationships and on the right track. That support comes via face to face communication, social media, emails and even in the form of financial support for the program from the local snowmobile community we serve. An example:

"The Fernie Snowmobile Association would like to acknowledge the outstanding contribution of the Avalanche Canada South Rockies Field Team to our local snowmobile community. … Despite a challenging regional snowpack and dramatic increase in backcountry snowmobile users this winter, we are pleased to note that we had an 'incident-free' season will all sledders returning home safe at the end of each day. We attribute this accomplishment to accurate regional bulletins, engaging social media posts, and a general increase in avalanche awareness in our region generated, in part, by the efforts of the South Rockies Field Team. "

-Email from Fernie Snowmobile Association 2018

CONCLUSION

Reviewing our existing program against the SBCC framework provides new insight into our work. We have identified where the program aligns with behavior change theory, how we can implement new ideas during winter 2018/2019 and how to start monitoring programs for effectiveness. The process has allowed us to formalize our concepts and tailor our communication for mountain snowmobilers in data sparse regions. It is our sincere hope that this paper forms the foundation of a living document that helps to inform our social media communications strategy at Avalanche Canada.

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