

Making the News

Using the Media for Avalanche Safety

By Mary Clayton

Communications Director

Canadian Avalanche Association & Canadian Avalanche Centre

Canada is an alpine nation, yet most Canadians have little or no effective knowledge of avalanches. At the Canadian Avalanche Association and Canadian Avalanche Centre, we are focusing significant effort into building cultural awareness of avalanches and avalanche safety strategies through the use of the electronic and print media. We believe strongly that education is the key to improving avalanche safety, and broadening the public's awareness of the avalanche phenomena is a fundamental building block of our educational strategy.

Generally speaking, we engage with the media in two ways—reactively and proactively. We are in a reactive mode when media attention comes to us when avalanches cause deaths, close highways or isolate communities. To an increasingly urbanized population, conflicts with nature are shocking. Often the people involved are perceived as foolhardy. Members of the media rarely have any background knowledge of snow and avalanches, and the pressure to get the story first can often result in information being published or broadcast that is at best, erroneous. At worst, it is harmful.

In these situations, we are challenged to facilitate the distribution of accurate and timely information relevant to public safety, without fueling the fires of sensationalism. In our role as the “go-to” office for all things avalanche in Canada, we handle as many as 30 media calls a day after particularly newsworthy events. We have learned ways to prepare for these onslaughts and how to ensure our spokespeople are briefed and ready with the messages we feel necessary to impart.

When we engage proactively, we seek media attention to cover stories that we have created. Our aim is to help Canadians understand and appreciate avalanches as a natural part of the winter environment, intrinsic to many winter activities and generally manageable through informed decisions. The challenge lies in providing newsworthy content that will attract media coverage and impart our safety messages in a way that resonates with the public, all in a cost-effective manner. We have developed a number of strategies for this purpose. If we measure their efficacy in terms of media reach, some have been more successful than others but all have contributed to our learning process.

Regardless of whether we are engaging the media on our terms or in reaction to an outside event, there are communication essentials that apply across the board. We have found it best to stick to just a few key messages, usually no more than three. It's important to know who will be speaking to the media, and who is not. All spokespeople have had some media training, and know how to present our messages in a systematic manner.

Over the past few years we have seen a marked rise in the public profile of our office. Our avalanche forecasters are becoming “regulars” with a number of media outlets and we feel we are on the right track in our quest to build cultural awareness of avalanches. This presentation will demonstrate the strategies we have developed to harness the power of the media—including the mistakes made and lessons learned.