RISE TO THE CHALLENGE: IT'S GREAT OUT THERE



The It's Great Out There Coalition wants to inspire more people to get active in the outdoors. A number of the outdoor industry's leading brands are lending their support.

The great outdoors

The whole of society can benefit when more people spend time outdoors: that's the message from Arne Strate, marketing director of the It's Great Out There (IGOT) Coalition. Launched by the European Outdoor Group (EOG) and 12 founding brand partners at the ISPO exhibition in February 2017, the non-profit organisation aims to encourage the European public to get more active through outdoor participation.

Membership fees from its founding members, which included Keen, Marmot, Mammut and The North Face, helped cover the initial cost of establishing the organisation at its base in Brussels. Since its launch, the likes of Columbia, Berghaus, PrimaLoft and Salomon have also signed up as founding members, while its full members now include Ortovox and Black Yak.

Mr Strate tells *WSA* that the EOG understands that increasing participation in outdoor activities is too big a goal for it to achieve alone. It felt collaborative action was the best solution and so the IGOT Coalition was born. It operates as a predominantly consumer-facing group, something which the EOG is unable to do.

The coalition looks to build on the success of the EOG's #ItsGreatOutThere campaign, which was launched in 2015. Originally conceived as a social media project to spread positive messages about the benefits of taking part in outdoor activities, it later moved offline, lending its support to real events that encourage more people to get outdoors.

The North Face mountain festival is one of the events that the IGOT Coalition has so far supported.

The North Face

COPYRIGHT



Through its grant programme, the coalition hopes to give more young people the opportunity to take part in outdoor activities.

Marmot / Wolfgang Ehn

Andrew Denton, chief executive of the UK-based Outdoor Industries Association, was named as its first secretary general in March 2017, while Mr Strate will combine his role as marketing director with that of head of marketing and business development for the EOG.

The organisation has three key objectives: motivate people to get outdoors, activate outdoor projects, and advocate for outdoor activities.

Motivate

The IGOT Coalition is leading campaign activities across Europe to boost interest in outdoor pursuits. Its website includes a tool that allows visitors to plan their expeditions, offering them details about potential routes, tips about accommodation and information about weather conditions. They can also browse an interactive calendar that lists organised events taking place near to their location.

Last September, adventurer, author and motivational speaker Alastair Humphreys was named as the organisation's first ambassador. He will support the campaign during his public appearances and through his popular social media channels. Mr Denton described him as "a hugely inspirational figure" who embodies everything the coalition stands for.

Mr Humphreys has a strong online presence and is best known for his #microadventures initiative. Mr Strate says the work of the coalition's first ambassador demonstrates it is possible to break down the barriers that people sometimes have in their minds when it comes to getting active outdoors (he lists poor weather as one of the most common excuses). "Alastair is showing that adventure can be found just outside the door of your own house," he says, adding that his exploits are proof that outdoor activities do not necessarily have to be expensive or take place far from urban areas.

Social media is proving to be a valuable tool for the IGOT Coalition and Mr Strate describes it as "a great way of communicating". He rejects the notion that electronic devices and outdoor activity are incompatible, insisting that it is important to embrace digital technology rather than dismiss it. The importance it holds in modern society means it would be foolish not to try and harness its power.

Activate

Another key aspect of what the coalition does is its championing of grass roots initiatives that encourage outdoor participation. As well as supporting events organised by its members, which have so far included The North Face mountain festival, the Marmot family camp and the Berghaus trail takeover, it oversees a programme to award grants to new projects.

The first recipient, Challenge Project 2017, was announced in August. The project has been organised for the past five years by a school in northern Germany. Its goal is to give students new experiences outside of the classroom in the hope of inspiring them to do more physical activity. The funding from the IGOT Coalition allowed the school to take 17 of its pupils and teachers on a 10-day trek through the Alps.

It will continue to award grants to projects that share its core objectives. Any non-profit organisation is eligible to apply through the

COPYRIGHT WSA ©

coalition's website for the opportunity to receive between €1,000 and €5,000. Although the aim is to inspire Europeans of all ages, priority will be given to projects that help young people access outdoor activities, especially those who are based in inner cities or whose living situation makes it difficult to get access to hills or mountains.

Mr Strate explains that grant recipients are currently chosen by the EOG board of directors but there are plans for the coalition's members to have their say in future decisions. He also suggests that a public vote via social media could be part of the selection process during this year.

Advocate

The founders of the coalition believe it can establish itself as the outdoor industry's voice in talks with European decision makers. It is already working with policy makers to direct attention and funding towards the promotion of outdoor activities and it will continue to engage with politicians and governing bodies in the hope of gaining their support. Mr Strate says the organisation has brought together a number of outdoor brands, allowing a unified front to be presented during important discussions.

The European Outdoor Group is officially listed on the Transparency Register of the European Commission (EC), which permits it to request direct meetings with policy makers in Brussels. Mr Strate explains that the coalition's work with the EC is only in its early stages and so it is too soon for any real progress to have been made. Nevertheless, it has been involved in the EC's #BeActive campaign and last September it again participated in the European Week of Sport, helping to guarantee that outdoor activities remain an important part of the event.

The coalition also wants to ensure detailed information about the benefits of outdoor activities are more widely disseminated. The challenge it faces is to prove to decision makers in Europe that this is an area in which they should be investing more. "We are trying to give outdoor activity a face that allows authorities to look into it more," Mr Strate says.

Work to be done

So how will the success of the It's Great Out There Coalition be measured? Mr Strate tells *WSA* it is involved in research into participation numbers, especially in the UK, France and Germany, Europe's biggest markets for outdoor activity. The data from these studies will offer some insight into whether people really are making changes to their lifestyle. He says feedback from consumers will be the most important yardstick by which progress can be measured.

It is also collaborating with the European Network of Outdoor Sports on a project called BOSS (Benefits of Outdoor Sports for Society). Mr Strate says tangible results from this project, which is funded by the EC, can be expected in 2019. The partners are attempting to demonstrate how beneficial increased participation in outdoor activity can be for society. Among the benefits he mentions is the potential to reduce the cost of medical care that can result from a healthier and more active lifestyle.



Arne Strate occupies important marketing roles at both the IGOT Coalition and the EOG.

European Outdoor Group

Mr Strate says a great deal of progress been made since the launch of the #ItsGreatOutThere campaign in 2015 and he is optimistic there is a lot more to come. The coalition's ultimate goal is to see more funding of outdoor activities, he says, and it will work to encourage European, national and regional bodies to reroute some of the money that is currently spent on more mainstream sports.

He believes the numerous associations across Europe dedicated to sports such as running and walking are doing great work. The problem, he explains, is that they are disconnected from one another. The It's Great Out There Coalition wants to become a bridge between clubs and associations that share the common goal of getting more people active in the outdoors. Connecting them to better streams of funding will allow a greater number of people to experience the benefits that come with increased exposure to the great outdoors.

COPYRIGHT WSA