Effectively Communicating Career Technical Education to Engage Every Learner: A Recruitment & Engagement Tool

Video Series

Section 6:
Developing, Tailoring, and Testing Messages

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Welcome to Section 6 of the Effectively Communicating Career Technical Education to Engage Every Learner: A Recruitment & Engagement Tool, where we provide information on using the power of relationships, messaging, and effective communication practices to enhance recruitment systems and structures to ensure all learners have access to and can succeed in high-quality CTE programs.

In previous sections of this tool, we have covered the importance of relationship building, getting to know the values, needs, and preferences of your audience, and how to maximize the efficacy of your recruitment and program communications. In this section we will talk about how to develop, tailor, and test messages that resonate with your focus audience and drive opinion and behavior change. This video will provide knowledge and strategies that will be helpful as you complete Section 6 of the accompanying workbook.
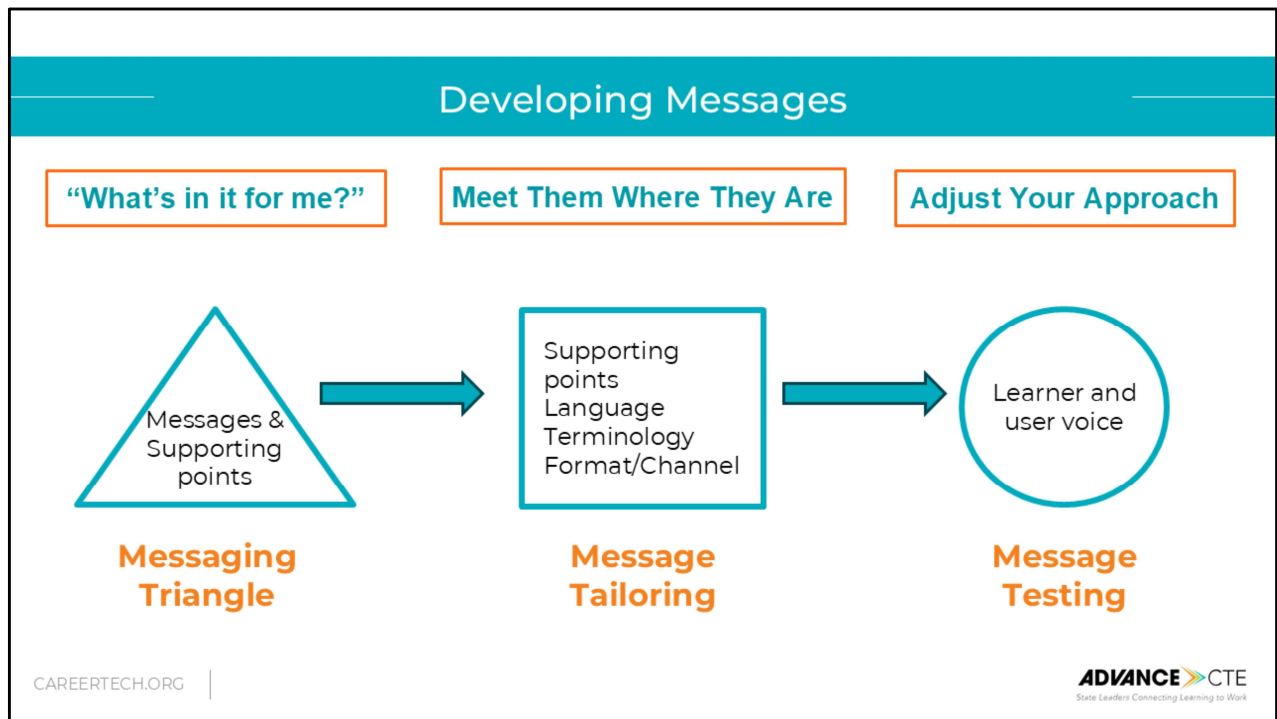
In Section 5, Maximizing the Efficacy of Communications we discussed the three core tenants of effective communication: "What's in it for me?", Meet Them Where They Are, and Adjust Your Approach. These core tenants are a major component of developing effective messages. We will walk through an example of these three steps in this video.

First, we will develop three broad messages and supporting points that communicate the what's in it for me of CTE for all learners and families using a messaging triangle.

Second, we will use information we have learned from directly engaging with the focus audience to tailor the messages to ensure they are meeting the audience where they are. This might include using different supporting statements, or a different language, or adjusting the message to the format and channel that will be used to disseminate it.

Third, we will share examples of how messages can be tested with the focus audience in a variety of ways. Adjustments can be made to the content, format, and/or dissemination in order to ensure that the messages are resonating with the focus audience and are driving opinion and behavior change.

Throughout this video, we will also share findings from messaging research that Advance CTE, with the generous support of the Siemens Foundation, has conducted with current and prospective CTE learners and families. It is important to note that the messages that will be presented are meant to serve as a foundation for your messaging and it is vital to engage with your focus audience to ensure that your messages are effective for them.

Key terminology

- **Central message:** A theme that serves as the center of the messaging triangle upon which the core messages are built.
- **Core messages:** Short statements that delve deeper into the "how" of the central theme or message.
- **Supporting statements:** Statements that contain data points that help to support core messages and can be tailored to specific audiences.
- **Message tailoring:** Adjusting messages to better meet the needs and preferences of a particular audience. Tailoring can include adjusting the language, terminology, format, and/or dissemination channel of the message.

GLOSSARY

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Here are some of the key terms that we will be discussing during this section. You can also find these terms in the glossary section of the workbook. Take a few moments now to review the key terminology before we go on. Feel free to pause the video if you need more time.

Let's discuss developing a messaging triangle.

Central message: A theme that serves as the center of the messaging triangle upon which the core messages are built.

Core messages: Short statements that delve deeper into the "how" of the central theme or message.

Supporting statements: Statements that contain data points that help to support core messages and can be tailored to specific audiences.

Message tailoring: Adjusting messages to better meet the needs and preferences of a particular audience. Tailoring can include adjusting the language, terminology, format, and/or dissemination channel of the message.

At the <u>center</u> of the triangle is a <u>central</u> message that represents the goal or brand of CTE. In both the 2017 and 2020 messaging research generously funded by Siemens Foundation, Advance CTE found that 60% of prospective and current CTE families chose "Preparing for the real world" as the most important aspect of CTE. The 2024 CTE perceptions survey conducted by Advance CTE and Edge Research showed that the statement "Be prepared for the real world" still resonates as motivating and extremely motivating with learners and families. We will place this central message at the center of the messaging triangle.

Part 1: Developing Central and Core Messages and Supporting Statements

If you already have core messages for your CTE programs/systems, skip to "Supporting Statements."

Use the following space to brainstorm the activities and outcomes of CTE that you believe matter most to the broader audience of learners and families. Ideally, you are basing these ideas on direct engagement with learners and families.
Examples: *"gain hands-on skills," "earn family-sustaining wages."*

Central Message

Using the list brainstormed in the first step on Part 1, create a **central message** or theme that will serve as the center of your messaging. This statement should be broad enough to encompass the relevant aspects of CTE you have listed previously.
Example: *"CTE prepares learners for the real world"* (developed based on Advance CTE research).

In part 1 of Section 6 in the workbook, you will brainstorm the activities and outcomes of CTE that you believe matter most to the broader audience of learners and families. Ideally, you are basing these ideas on what you learned through direct engagement with learners and families in Section 4. You will use this brainstorm to then develop your own central message that best represents the goal or brand of your CTE programs and systems.

Around the sides of the messaging triangle we will add three <u>core</u> messages that delve deeper into the how of the central message and that reflect the needs, interests, and values of the broader audience. The core messages were resonated well with learners and families in the same messaging research and perceptions survey mentioned earlier.

From the center out, we are starting to paint a picture of how CTE can meet the needs, interests, and values of the broader audience.

Core Messages

Using the central message from the video—"CTE prepares learners for the real world"—and based on Advance CTE's messaging research, three core messages that help provide detail as to how CTE prepares learners for the real world are: **Gain real-world skills and experience, financial security and independence, and more options for college and career success.**

Messaging Triangle

More options for college
and career success

CTE prepares
learners for
the real world

Gain real-world
skills & experience

Financial security
and independence

Next, using the list of components of CTE brainstormed previously, develop three **core messages** that help to add detail as to how CTE delivers on the central message. These core messages should be short statements with one theme per statement.

Three Core Messages
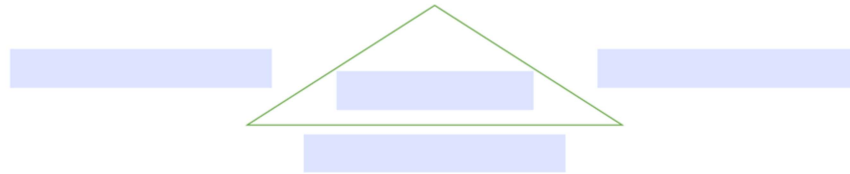
In part 1 of Section 6 of the workbook, after you create a central message you will create core messages that delve deeper into the how of your central message. If you already have a central message and/or core messages, the workbook offers an opportunity to skip ahead to the evaluation of how your core messages align with the needs of the focus audience.

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Supporting Statements for Core Messages

CTE helps learners gain real-world skills and experience that lead to financial security and independence with more options for college and career success.

Gain real-world skills and experience:

- Connect to certifications and credentials, work-based learning, labor market information (LMI)

Example:

- Eighty-five percent of families participating in CTE are satisfied with opportunities to gain skills in a specific field compared to only 54 percent of families not participating in CTE.

Financial security and independence

- Connect to average wage information, placement rates, reduced financial burden for postsecondary education due to dual or concurrent enrollment

Example:

- Eight years after their expected high school graduation date, the median annual earnings for CTE concentrators were higher than for non-concentrators.*

*https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/cte/index.html#data-story-title

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Taking the three core messages from the previous slide, we can create one statement that adds context to how CTE prepares learners for the real world. CTE helps learners gain real-world skills and experience that lead to financial security and independence with more options for college and career success. Translating the messaging triangle into a meaningful phrase provides a ready-made message that can be the foundation for your recruitment and program communications with all trusted sources and audiences.

To help add more value to the "what's in it for me" component of these messages, the next step is to create supporting statements. Supporting statements are bite-sized proof points that provide evidence to reinforce CTE's effectiveness in accomplishing what the core messages say CTE can deliver. To create these proof points, use data from learner participation and outcomes in your CTE programs. You should have a lot of these data points on hand.

For the first core message "Gain real-world skills and experience" the supporting statements could include information on the certifications and credentials learners can earn, work-based learning opportunities, labor market information connected to how CTE is meeting the demands for labor market needs, etc. Advance CTE's 2020 national messaging survey led to the resulted data point that families in CTE were significantly more satisfied with skill building opportunities.

For the second core message "Financial security and independence" supporting statements could include average wages for CTE concentrators vs non-concentrators, placement rates, information on reduced debt through dual or concurrent enrollment, etc. According to the U.S. Department of Education's 2019 report Bridging the Skills Gap: Career and Technical Education in High School, the median annual earnings for CTE concentrators eight years after their expected graduation date were higher than non-concentrators. (https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/cte/index.html#data-story-title)

The supporting statements you create should be aligned with the opportunities available in your state or community.

Supporting Statements for Core Messages

CTE helps learners gain real-world skills and experience that lead to financial security and independence with more options for college and career success.

More options for college and career:

- Connect to apprenticeships, dual/concurrent enrollment, graduation and placement rates, partnerships between secondary and postsecondary institutions

Examples:

- CTE Concentrators are more likely to graduate high school and more likely to pursue postsecondary education than non-concentrators.*
- Over 80% of current CTE families are satisfied with opportunities to earn college credits and take advanced classes in high school compared to 61% of families not participating in CTE across race, ethnicity, and income.**

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*https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/cte/index.html#data-story-title
** Advance CTE messaging research

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For the third core message "More options for college and career", connect to apprenticeship opportunities, dual or concurrent enrollment, graduation and placement rates, and other partnerships that show flexible paths to postsecondary education. CTE concentrators are more likely to graduate high school, or complete their equivalency, and pursue postsecondary education than non-concentrators. Over 80% of current CTE families are satisfied with the opportunities to get a jump start on postsecondary education by earning college credit and taking advanced classes in high school as compared to only 61% of families not participating in CTE across race, ethnicity, and income.

Use the following space to develop your supporting statements. For each core message, strive for one to three supporting statements based on data from your CTE programs.

Core Message	Supporting Statement(s)

In part 1 of Section 6 in the workbook, you have an opportunity to create supporting statements for the core messages you have created. For each core message, you will strive to create one to three supporting statements based on data from your CTE programs.

Once you have completed your messaging triangle with three core messages and supporting statements that appeal to the broader audience in Section 6 of the workbook, you will want to tailor the messages and statements to better fit the interests, needs, and values of the focus audience.

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Message Tailoring

To meet the focus audience where they are, we must ensure that communications are accessible and in the formats and channels that the audience trusts and prefers.

Barriers and Considerations: language, broadband access, cultural norms and bias, barriers to participation in programs (e.g. transportation, program or opportunity access)

Channels:
- where do they get their information– could be based on preference, accessibility, ease of use and/or necessity
- how do they prefer to receive information (video, infographic, word of mouth)
- who do they trust

Resources: current capacity, relationships with trusted messengers, feedback from learners, current channels

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As discussed in Section 5, in order to maximize the efficacy of communications, we must meet the audience where they are by ensuring that communications are accessible and in the formats and channels that the focus audience prefers. That also extends to message development — messages should be adjusted to better align with the values and needs of a specific audience.

The most effective way to tailor messages is to solicit feedback from learners and other key trusted sources on your core messages and supporting statements. If you have already gotten to know your audience as discussed in Section 4, you may use the information you have learned to tailor the messages prior to soliciting feedback from the focus audience.

Considerations for tailoring messages include:

- Barriers and Considerations: Taking into consideration any barriers that may exist or additional supports needed, such as the need to translate messages into another language or using different terminology to better align with cultural norms, access to communications channels, and limitations in program offerings. For example, not all programs offer the same certifications or work-based learning opportunities. Ensure that the messages accurately reflect the opportunities available to the specific audience.

- Communication <u>Channels</u> and Sources: Evaluating <u>where</u> they get their information and in which <u>formats</u> they prefer to receive it. As discussed in Section 4, <u>school</u> counselors, educators, school websites and google searches are some of the top sources of information learners and families trust to help inform their college and career decisionmaking.
- In addition, it is important to evaluate your <u>current</u> capacity, relationships with trusted messengers, feedback from learners and other collaborators, as well as the current channels you are utilizing for communications.

COMMUNICATIONS AUDIT TOOL CONTINUED

Communication Channel	Channel Status	Audience for Engagement/ Targeting (educators, administrators, intermediaries, learners, families, workforce/ industry, etc.)	Where Your Focus Population Engages/ Gets Their Information	Notes
Print Communications				
Brochures/pamphlets/infographics	Consistently	Learners, families	Yes	Families over learners
Posters/signs	Somewhat	Learners, career advisors	Yes	They are seen but do not always
Letters/written correspondence	Somewhat	Families more than learners	Yes	
Newspaper/local magazines	No			
Print Communications				
Print publications—state based				
Contributions to print publications—school based (program brochure, recruitment materials, etc.)				
Contributions to print publications—community, faith, or other organization based (printed newsletter, calendar, etc.)				
Contributions to print publications—other				
Other print media (specify here)				

Events	Are you currently engaging in these events?	Which audiences are engaging with these events?	Does your focus audience (learners/families) engage/ get their information from these channels?	Use this space to provide any additional detail or comments about the channel or the need for additional information.
In Person (information session, career fair, other)	Consistently	Families, learners	No	
Career fair	Consistently	Learners	Yes	Don't always see themselves
Information session	Somewhat			
Career Technical Student Organization events/competitions	Consistently			
Other school events/competitions				

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Part 2 of Section 6 in the workbook asks you to first evaluate how well your core messages and supporting statements align with the what matters, current perceptions of CTE, and any barriers and considerations as discovered through direct engagement with the focus audience in Section 4. You then have the opportunity to tailor the messages to better fit the needs and values of the focus audience (learners) from your focus population.

Part 2 of Section 6 of the workbook will also ask you to revisit the Communications Audit Tool in Section 5 to determine the best format and channel for reaching the focus audience and how you may need to tweak the messages or supporting statements to best fit the format and/or channel.

As discussed in the Section 5 video, consistently evaluating the impact, reach, and performance of your recruitment communications using data and learner feedback will allow you to adjust your messages and approach for maximum efficacy. There are two major vehicles for evaluating the efficacy of your recruitment communications.

Continue to engage learners and other collaborators to offer feedback on your messages, communication formats, and channels via surveys, focus groups, or a learner council, and through continued direct engagement with the focus audience. Continued engagement and incorporating learner feedback will allow you to best meet the changing needs of the focus audience.

Collecting and evaluating data to inform adjustments in your strategy and approach can greatly increase the efficacy of your recruitment communications. Before launching a communications campaign, determine which data you will collect and from which sources. These sources may include digital analytics or metrics, participation in events, interest and enrollment, or changes in consolidated annual report data. Some of these data sources will be available more quickly than others so it is important to use a combination of short and long-term data sources.

Part 3 of Section 6 in the workbook helps you to plan how you will continue to engage with

learners to test messages and which <u>data</u> you will collect to help inform the efficacy of the messages through reflection questions and the next steps activities.

Throughout this video we have referenced Section 6 of the workbook, let's revisit each part.
In Part 1, you will brainstorm the activities and outcomes of CTE to create a central message. You will then create three core messages that delve deeper into the how of your central message.
After you have created your central and core messages, you will strive to create one to three supporting statements based on data from your CTE programs.

In Part 2, you will first evaluate how well your core messages and supporting statements align with the what matters, current perceptions of CTE, and any barriers and considerations as discovered through direct engagement with the focus audience in Section 4. You then have the opportunity to tailor the messages to better fit the needs and values of the focus audience (learners) from your focus population.

In Part 3, you will plan how you will test and measure the efficacy of messages with the focus audience, or learners, through reflection questions. The next steps activities help you begin to engage additional audiences for message tailoring and testing.

Next Steps

Work with your team and/or colleagues to:

Compile examples of recruitment and program communication assets in the formats identified in the Communications Audit in Section 5.

Utilize Section 6: Developing, Tailoring and Testing Messages in the work book to help

- design or update your core messages;

- tailor your messages based on what you've learned from directly engaging with the focus audience; and

- strategize how you will test the messages to improve their efficacy and impact.

Section 7: Continuing the Work

- Scaling and sustaining the work.

SECTION 6

DEVELOPING, TAILORING, TESTING MESSAGES

Conduct direct engagement for message tailor/test

2 months

To take the next steps, compile some examples of recruitment and program communication assets in the formats identified in the Communications Audit in Section 5 (flyer, brochure, program guide) to help determine any current CTE recruitment messages.

Then complete Section 6 which will help you design or update your core messages and supporting statements, use what you have learned and continue to learn from the focus audience to tailor the messages, and to strategize which data you will use and how you will test the messages to improve their efficacy and impact. The anticipated minimum time required to complete Section 6 is approximately 2 months though it may take you more or less time.

In the final section of this tool, we will discuss sustaining and scaling the work.

This concludes the Section 6 video of the Effectively Communicating Career Technical Education to Engage Every Learner: A Recruitment and Engagement Tool. For more information on the CTE messaging research conducted by Advance CTE with learners and families and supported by the Siemens Foundation, please visit careertech.org/what-we-do/case-making-communications/engage-families-learners or scan the code.