

CTE Advocacy 101

Turning Strategy into Action

This short guide provides an introduction to advocacy communications to help you put your advocacy goals into action.

What Is Advocacy Communications?

Advocacy communications is persuading an audience to take a desired action. It's about connecting a central message with an audience in a way that compels them to act.

Advocacy starts with a core message. That core message is then tailored to make sure it is meaningful to the audience you want to reach. Advocacy communications is defined by a call to action – what you want audiences to do or the action you want them to take.

Advocacy communications is interactive and cannot be a one-way street. The advocate must be prepared with a message that he or she believes will connect, while remaining flexible to respond to the audience's questions and concerns.

Lastly, the end goal of advocacy communications is persuasion, not just education. That doesn't mean you aren't providing audiences with information and knowledge that educate them on the topic. It means that the goal of advocacy communications is for an audience to take a desired action. Below are the steps for putting together a successful advocacy communications effort.

Key to Success 1: Be prepared...but be flexible.

Step One: Develop the Message

What you want an audience to do and the reasons they should do it form the basis of the core message framework, which is the starting point for your advocacy communications planning.

A simple way to organize the core message is around a triangle, with the core belief or main takeaway message in the center of the triangle and the best three supporting messages arranged around the points. As a whole, these are the central messages you should repeat each and every time you engage with an audience.

For much of its work, Advance CTE has already created core message triangles and talking points for conversations you will have with audiences, such as parents and students, about the benefits of CTE.

The purpose of the core message triangle is to keep all advocates on a consistent script. Message repetition and discipline are central tenets of advocacy communications – *you* may get tired of hearing the message over and over again, but as a rule of thumb, an audience must hear a message **11 times** before it starts to sink in – so stick with it.

Key to Success 2: Stay on message.

Example: The Candidate's Core Message Triangle



Step Two: Know Your Audience

Messages do not exist in a vacuum, and not every message will work with every audience. Messages must be tailored for each audience to be effective.

The tailoring process starts by knowing the audience. Try to step into their shoes and see the issue from their perspective. You can do this by asking and answering a few basic questions about an audience:

- What is their knowledge of the subject?
- What benefit or threat will they face from taking the desired action or not taking the desired action?
- How do they like to be addressed?
- What historical or cultural factors influence them?
- What is the most important thing in their world today?

Example: A CTE Audience Snapshot – Students

Here's how you might think about these questions as they relate to students:

- What do students know about CTE? Are they likely to think they know a lot but really don't? Or is what they know accurate or complete?
- What benefits would students gain from pursuing CTE? What consequences would they face from not?
- How do students like to be addressed? How should I frame my message in a way that will increase the chances of them hearing me? How do they receive information?
- What cultural factors influence them? What do I know about their backgrounds? Their lifestyles? Their aspirations?
- What is the most important thing in their world today? Are they seniors ready for graduation? Are they freshmen? Will I be speaking to them right before (or after) lunch?

Key to Success 3: Take the time to understand your audience so that you can connect with them for greater impact.

Taking the time to discuss and answer these questions *before* you talk with an audience will help you prepare for step three.

Step Three: Tailor Your Message to Your Audience

Tailoring the message means figuring out which of the supporting messages work better for which audiences. For example, if a candidate for elected office is going to be speaking before a local chamber of commerce, she might rely more heavily on her taxes and jobs messages than on safety concerns.

In the case of CTE, you might find that, after filling out the audience worksheet, groups of parents would be more interested in hearing about expanded career options for their children; students would want to know more about the real high school experience CTE delivers; and policymakers would care most about the opportunities for students to gain real-world skills while still in high school.

Consider tone and vocabulary changes as well. For instance, the term “Career Technical Education” may not be applicable in every state or audience, so use the term that best describes your program and with which your audience is already familiar. Remember, it’s all about connecting.

Also think about the right spokesperson. For example, you may find that the best way to address parents is to have a guidance counselor – who is responsible for helping their children decide what to do after high school and whom over 80 percent of responding parents on a recent Advance CTE survey said they would trust for information on CTE – speak to them. A policymaker might likely respond well to a business leader or district superintendent. And just about any audience would like to hear directly from the students benefiting from CTE.

Key to Success 4: Choose a spokesperson to whom the audience will listen.

When you start with the core message, tailor it and select the right spokesperson, you are increasing your odds for success. Remember, advocacy communications is about connecting a message to an audience, leading to action.

Step Four: Develop an Engagement Plan

Once you know the basics about message development and tailoring, you can start putting it all together in a stakeholder outreach plan.

Set a Goal

Start by setting a goal for your outreach. It can be broad, such as “Enroll more students in CTE programs” or “build more support for the state CTE system.” Or it can be more specific, such as “Increase student enrollment by 15 percent in CTE over the next 18 months” or “collect 100 signatures in support of CTE-friendly state legislation.” Whatever it is, it should be doable with a little bit of stretch – not so unrealistic that it can’t be met, which would only depress your efforts.

Stay Focused

Now you can start thinking about how you are going to conduct your outreach to meet this goal. Smart planning is focused planning. This means always keeping in mind the goal. You want to stay focused on what you consider the “win.”

Plan from the “Inside-Out”

You also want to plan from the “inside-out.” This means developing a plan for reaching out first to the audiences closest to you and then moving to audiences more external. The idea is to win supporters from the most likely place – the people who know you and your mission best.

Choose Communications Channels Wisely

Next, think about allocating your resources most efficiently. Resources include time and money, as well as outreach tactics, using varied channels of communication:

- Direct contact (e.g., speaking at a Back-to-School night)
- Earned media (e.g., talking to a reporter from a local newspaper)
- Digital media (e.g., tweeting a positive message)
- Paid media (e.g., posting online ads on sites most widely viewed by your target audience)

You should then consider what materials you might need to communicate effectively with your target audience through the channels you have identified. You may need:

- A one-page leave behind
- A PowerPoint presentation with talking points
- A guide for your audience about CTE
- A media kit
- An advocacy page on your website
- Sample tweets and Facebook posts
- Success stories about CTE
- Endorsements by business leaders.

Key to Success 5: Do the doable. Set realistic goals that you can reach with a little stretch.

Step Five: Measure for Success

Advocacy work is rarely finished. One success typically leads to a new priority, and the same is true with setbacks. Advocates need to continually engage new stakeholders, while making sure that committed allies have the latest information to keep them engaged. And, as mentioned above, an audience must hear a message 11 times before it starts to sink in. Staying on message is key – and following up with key audiences in many different venues is critical to a successful effort.

It is imperative that you have ongoing outreach and communications strategies in place to maintain the level of public support necessary to sustain your effort. To stay on track, you should review your intended goals at key points and assess what has been achieved. What worked? What could have worked better? Taking the time to evaluate your efforts is time well spent. Adjust your messages and outreach tactics based on what you learn.

A Stakeholder Worksheet

Create a worksheet for each audience that features the goal at the top to keep you focused.

Goal:

Enroll more students in CTE

Audience:

Parents of high school freshmen

Audience Snapshot:

Answers to the questions above

Messages for This Audience:

Tailored messages based on the audience snapshot

Outreach Tactics:

How you will communicate the message to them

Materials:

What you will need to reach them in the channels identified above and in a way that responds to what we know about them as an audience