

# CSTE Strategic Communications Plan

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# CSTE Strategic Communications Plan

## Introduction

One of the priorities from CSTE's 2012-2014 strategic plan is to improve communications both internally and externally. The strategic objectives for this priority are to establish a marketing and communications function at the CSTE National Office and to strengthen relationships with sister agencies (e.g., NACCHO, APHL, and ASTHO). There are several other strategic objectives within CSTE's strategic plan also relate to communications:

- Recruit and retain member champions
- Be recognized as the home for all applied public health epidemiologists
- Enhance epidemiologic programs in the areas of: chronic disease, mental health, substance abuse, maternal and child health, environmental health, occupational health, and injury prevention

This strategic communications plan is intended to lay out CSTE's approach to ensure that communications are well-coordinated, effectively managed, and responsive to the needs of its members, its partners, and all applied public health epidemiologists. This plan lays out broad goals, audiences, and channels/strategies to accomplish those goals and reach those audiences; more detailed plans of action may be needed for some ideas presented below. These plans of action will be developed as needed. While not its main focus, this strategic communications plan mentions membership engagement, retention, and recruitment at least indirectly; these issues are addressed more comprehensively in a separate but closely-related membership strategy.

## Current climate

CSTE began as a council of designated State Epidemiologists who gathered annually to determine the list of nationally notifiable conditions starting in the 1950s. Since then, CSTE has retained this activity as its primary undertaking while also expanding its programs to include developing best practices, providing subject matter experts for consultations, training and increasing the capacity of the applied epidemiology workforce, and providing a forum for applied epidemiologists to network and learn from each other.

## Mission

CSTE's mission is to:

- Promote effective use of epidemiologic data to guide public health practice and improve health
- Support effective public health surveillance and epidemiologic practice through training, capacity development, and peer consultation
- Develop standards for practice
- Advocate for resources and scientifically based policy

## Vision

The organization's updated vision is "using the power of epidemiology to improve the public's health."

## Strengths & opportunities for improvement

A listening tour conducted with National Office staff members and key members and leaders revealed several important common threads, both strengths and weaknesses of CSTE's current communications.

### Strengths

- The volume of email communications has improved greatly in the last several years.
  - Emails about the CSTE Annual Conference are clear and have a consistent voice.

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- Several committees' digest emails combine relevant messages to condense email volume.
- Automated member renewal emails are streamlined and clear.
- Members and staff consistently name the quarterly newsletter as an example of a strong CSTE communications product.
- CSTE branding has developed in the last couple of years, and the quality of the design and "look" of CSTE's publications and other products is noted as greatly improved.

### Opportunities for improvement

- The most consistently-mentioned opportunity for improvement was the need to define CSTE more strongly:
  - Who is CSTE? Who are CSTE members and potential members?
  - What does CSTE do?
- The second most commonly mentioned needed improvement was refining email communications:
  - Ensure all organization-wide emails have a clear message and consistent voice.
  - Extend digest emails to other committees.
  - Bundle emails about new publications or other announcements, especially to State Epidemiologists, and create an email queue.

## Goals & objectives

The strengths and opportunities for improvement along with CSTE's history, mission, and vision, form the basis for this strategic communications plan and its goals and objectives. Each goal and objective will target one or more [audience](#) and will be achieved via one or more of the [channels and strategies](#) outlined below.

- 1. Define CSTE as the home for all applied public health epidemiologists**
  - a. Educate partners and potential members that CSTE is their professional association
  - b. Educate public health professionals that CSTE is the place to turn for epidemiologic expertise
- 2. Engage current members, partners, and potential members**
  - a. Provide personalized communication and interactions
  - b. Create a community of epidemiologists
- 3. Provide clear, consistent information through appropriate, coordinated channels**

## Audiences

Audiences for these communications goals can be categorized into one of three groups: core, internal, and external. Each audience is described below.

### Core

CSTE's core audience consists of current members and partners. Current members are mostly (72%) active members working in epidemiology at state, local, tribal, or territorial health agencies. Associate members (23%) include those working in federal, academic, or non-profit settings, and student members (5%) include those pursuing a degree in public health or a related field full-time. CSTE's partners include its funders and members and staff of partner organizations, such as ASTHO, APHL, NACCHO, and others.

### Internal

The internal audience is the CSTE National Office staff. The National Office has grown from 2 staff in the 1990s to over 25 staff today. Staff members focus on programs and activities or operations.

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## External

CSTE's external audience consists of potential members, potential funders, and related public health fields (e.g., public health informatics or public health laboratories). While more difficult to define and enumerate, this external audience interacts with CSTE members and staff often, making it an important group to include in the intended audiences.

## Audiences outside of the scope

It is also important to define the audiences that are *not* part of this communications plan. While future iterations of this plan may include the broader public and the public health community, CSTE, for the next several years, will not focus on communicating and marketing to these groups.

## Key messages

Messages central to the organization and to its goals can be used verbatim or in theme in various communications channels. These key messages are starting points for marketing messages; they convey CSTE's basic tenets.

**CSTE uses the power of epidemiology to improve the public's health.**

**CSTE is the home for *all* applied public health epidemiologists.**

**For subject matter expertise and resources for applied epidemiology, turn to CSTE.**

**CSTE members contribute in both small and large ways to affect the big picture.**

**CSTE values its members – their expertise, their participation, their impact.**

## Channels & strategies

Communications channels carry messages to audiences; the channels below represent the ways that CSTE's message should be conveyed to its audiences. The bullet points under each channel are strategies, or more specific points to explain what will be done within each channel.

### Website

The CSTE website is more content-rich than most of its partner organizations; it includes publications, articles, indicators, toolkits, position statements, trainings and webinars, forums for discussion and interaction, and more. The website is one of the first places to which core and external audiences turn for information; therefore, it is imperative that this channel be CSTE's best source of comprehensive information.

- Make information easier for visitors to find
- Change content more frequently so repeat visitors see new information
- Point audiences to the website more frequently for further information

### Publications

CSTE is known for its publications, which are of both high quality and large quantity. Members and program staff consistently produce consensus-based documents that are well-respected in the epidemiology and public health fields.

- Continue matching content with high-quality layout and design to deliver the message most effectively

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- Create a dissemination plan for publications earlier in the timeline

### Newsletters

Quarterly newsletters

- Continue members-only quarterly newsletters
- Preview newsletter content for potential members

E-newsletters

- Transform existing groups' regularly-scheduled digest emails into e-newsletters through an email marketing service
- Extend concept to other committees at varying frequencies, as appropriate for the group

### Member spotlights

In order to accomplish the first goal, "define CSTE as the home for all applied public health epidemiologists," audiences need to be told the story of who CSTE is. What types of people belong to CSTE? How does the organization fit a potential member's needs? Member spotlights, which previously were available only in members-only newsletters, can tell that story.

- Feature CSTE members in publicly-available spotlights on the website and in e-newsletters in order to recognize members' contributions and show potential members what members can and do accomplish
- Continue in-depth member spotlights in the members-only newsletter

### Email

Email is and will continue to be the primary way that the National Office communicates with its audiences. While the introduction of e-newsletters will change the volume and content of emails sent from individual staff members, email will remain an essential communications channel. Therefore, it is crucial for email to be professional, engaging, and consistent. Large-batch emails sent for membership, the Annual Conference, and other grouped purposes should similarly be consistent.

- Implement more uniform email signature blocks as a way to brand the organization and to convey important messages
- Centralize editing content for and distribution of large-batch emails to ensure they are written from a consistent voice and are sent according to a queue

### Annual Conference

The CSTE Annual Conference is one of the organization's most popular events as well as an effective membership driver, an optimal networking opportunity for attendees, and the venue to maintain the list of nationally notifiable conditions, CSTE's core activity. CSTE's communications goals can be furthered at the Annual Conference by taking advantage of the opportunity to interact in-person.

- Collect members' stories via photo, video, or sound booth, or other means – why is CSTE important to them? Why did they join CSTE? What have they found meaningful from belonging to CSTE?
- Create opportunities for meaningful interactions for members, e.g., a new member orientation sunrise session or a 'mentoring' panel to encourage discussion between new and more senior-level epidemiologists

### Other in-person meetings

While the Annual Conference is the largest in-person meeting, other in-person meetings throughout the year provide opportunities for interaction on smaller, more specialized scale.

- Take more pictures at meetings to give potential members a visual idea of what meetings look like

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- Give attendees information about the organization

### Implementation & Evaluation

Implementing this strategic communications plan will be a team effort involving operations and program staff, management, and the Executive Director as well as feedback from the intended audiences. It is essential that each National Office staff member feel a responsibility for his or her contributions towards reaching CSTE's communications goals; CSTE's success lies in the quality of every interaction with its intended audiences.

Some of the channels, strategies, and ideas presented above necessitate a plan of action to detail how they will be accomplished; two examples of these plans of action are given below. Plans of action will be developed for each of the bullets above and will include the following components: main point of contact, others involved, timeline, and detailed steps.

Evaluation is an important element of this strategic communications plan. The Director of Marketing and Communications will work with the Program Evaluation Coordinator to measure the success of both new and continued communications channels and strategies, to identify obstacles in implementation, and to identify new strategies or audiences. Website analytics and email marketing metrics will be two crucial components to evaluation, easily set up before implementation and monitored throughout given time periods. Feedback from intended audiences is also an important component of evaluation, and surveying or reaching out to members and potential members will be part of that process.

Analytics and metrics will be utilized to measure who is being targeted and the effectiveness of the strategies outlined above. Some metrics will be simple yes/no answers, such as implementation of an e-newsletter service. Other measures will rely on web analytics such as visits to CSTE's website and various pages therein. These measures will be closely related to the metrics monitored for the membership strategy.

Surveying members will be an important component of the membership strategy's evaluation. In order to measure the reception of the messages and communications strategies, periodically surveying members is a way to get feedback – both quantitative and qualitative – from current, former, and potential members. These surveys will not be incessant; rather, they will be small-scale, moderate ways to get input and gauge progress on the membership strategy.

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## Appendix 1: Using narrative

### Story 1

One CSTE member began her career as an Applied Epidemiology Fellow. She had a great experience in the Fellowship and after graduating from the program found herself looking for ways to continue her involvement with CSTE. She reached out to the CSTE National Office and volunteered to review abstracts for the Annual Conference. As she says, “the Annual Conference was the focal point of each year of the Fellowship, and reviewing abstracts gave me a way to remain involved with the conference and meet new people.” This activity and other subcommittee involvement is a way for her to transition from a Fellow to her work in a state health department. As a generalist in her state, she’s able to find a variety of activities and resources at CSTE. She sees how to connect with applied epidemiologists in other states. CSTE has helped her see how her work fits into the larger picture of public health and applied epidemiology.

### Story 2

Another CSTE member began his career as an EIS officer over 15 years ago. It wasn’t required to join CSTE, but it seemed like a good fit and a good way to get involved, plus the State Epidemiologist in his state was a member and encouraged him to participate. At first, he would go to Annual Conference and enjoy his time there, although he didn’t know very many people. Slowly, he rose within his state health department and got more involved with CSTE gradually over the years. He began to participate in more subcommittee activities and started to see more familiar faces at Annual Conferences each year. He joined projects and workgroups based on his interests and was able to both contribute to the conversation and learn from others. Over the years, he has authored position statements, led workgroups, represented CSTE at meetings, mentored Applied Epidemiology Fellows, and more. He sees CSTE as *his* professional association. This member is Tim Jones, CSTE President-Elect, Executive Board member, Subcommittee chair, consultant, and, just as importantly, member of CSTE. From being a new member to being an admired leader in the field of applied epidemiology, Tim found that CSTE is the home for all applied public health epidemiologists.