


CASE STUDY

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED:
CORNERSTONE CHRISTIAN
ACADEMY'S SUCCESSFUL
COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY
AND VIRTUAL LEARNING PLAN





Cornerstone Christian Academy in Sugarland, TX, prides itself on enriched academics, stimulating activities and programs, and equipping students with spiritual guidance for a lifetime. The independent, Christian school offers grades K-8 and has 311 students enrolled. Cornerstone Christian Academy was well-prepared before COVID-19 hit: they had a thorough communication plan, modern website, and an engaged social media presence.

Tracy Crawford, FACTS' K-12 customer relationship manager spoke to Cornerstone Christian Academy's Nancy Burnett, admissions director, Kristi Armstrong, business office administrator, and Jennifer Nall, advancement & PR associate, about the school's prescient communications planning and how they've pivoted their instruction, admissions, and marketing for COVID-19.

► **Tracy:** Thank you so much for speaking with me today! Tell me first a little bit about yourselves and what you do for the school.

► **Jennifer:** I do all of the fundraising, internal, and external communications. I share some marketing responsibilities with Nancy.

► **Nancy:** I handle everything related to admissions. I share some marketing responsibilities with Jennifer.

► **Kristi:** I oversee all of the tuition and aid.

► **Tracy:** How soon did you start preparing your families for moving to distance learning?

► **Jennifer:** I feel like we flew into it. Our middle school teachers were already using Google Classroom. One of our elementary teachers was also using Google Classroom. So, it was an easy transition for most of our teachers. At the very beginning when we heard this was all going on, our head of school and principals put together our emergency protocol that included kicking off a Virtual Learning Plan. This plan has since been modified and changed over the last six weeks based on feedback from parents and teachers. We've also reviewed other resources from an admissions professional association in which we are a member [Houston Area Independent Schools (HAIS)]. We adapted their materials to meet our needs.

I helped create a [COVID-19 Updates page](#) and a [Virtual Learning Plan page](#) on the school [website](#). Within this page, we published a Quick Guide to Google Classroom, downloads of the Virtual Learning Plans by grade groupings, student roles & responsibilities, parent/guardian roles & responsibilities, as well as key terms for virtual learning. We wanted to ensure that expectations were clearly communicated to the parents. That page on the website helped us to accomplish that. Our lead teachers and principals helped pass out devices and hard copy packets to parents that explained everything they would need in order to do virtual learning. Because it was new and different, teachers put together the hard copy packets first, then moved everything online.

► **Tracy:** How have parents responded to your various communication methods and educational materials?

► **Jennifer:** Parent responses have varied from, "It's too much. I can't do it," to, "We need more." Our parents have been very supportive. It's been a very positive experience for us and our parents. It was more challenging for elementary parents and teachers initially since they were not familiar with Google Classroom or Zoom. But now some parents have even commented that they like it better than what they are seeing from public school districts or what their neighbors are experiencing.

► **Tracy:** I know you're using Google Classroom for remote instruction, but are there any other tools you're using for your distance learning program?

► **Jennifer:** Our primary tools have been Google Classroom plus FACTS SIS integration, FACTS Family Portal, and our 1:1 device program. All of these were in use prior to COVID-19.

► **Tracy:** What are your top tips for schools for doing remote learning successfully? And does that change depending on grade level?

► **Jennifer:** One of our favorite tools is the Google Classroom integration with FACTS SIS. Google also has Hangouts/Meets, which is a great tool. These tools allow teachers to meet with students and post assignments. Our strong school website was also essential to this transition. We ensured that our school website had everything our families would need for this transition. Two things that we also found important were having a clear virtual learning plan and a strong communication plan.

Our virtual learning plan is 1:1 technology in every classroom starting in kindergarten. That was already in place. Devices stayed at school. When the school closures hit, the IT team got together right away to ensure every single iPad or computer was fully loaded with the applications that students would need and that every student had the same applications on their device. This was extremely helpful to teachers and the students. These devices were passed out to parents along with the aforementioned hard copy packets.

Our communications plan was strong because we believe that all communication needs to funnel through one place. It's not going to work if it's haphazard or you have multiple communications coming from multiple sources.

The last tip I have is clearly listing roles and responsibilities on the [website](#). We borrowed this communication tip from another regional school. We thought the idea was fabulous and decided to tweak it to fit Cornerstone.

► **Tracy:** What were your main methods of communicating with current families as the crisis unfolded and how are you maintaining that communication right now?

► **Jennifer:** We were in constant contact with families through all-school or divisional e-mails. We also use FACTS Family Portal, which was in use prior to school closures and virtual learning. We used FACTS SIS for lesson plans and grades and Google Classroom for all assignments.



► **Tracy:** I like what you said about roles and responsibilities and funneling all communications through one place. How does that process work internally?

► **Kristi:** We already had a strong communication plan in place prior to COVID-19. For example, all communication funnels through the head of school unless it's a newsletter from a teacher. If anyone needs to put anything out, it goes to the head of school for approval. It's then sent to Jennifer to be proofed and edited, and then loaded to Constant Contact to be sent. Jennifer is the gatekeeper. Content created by principals goes to the teacher(s) first for feedback, and then to the head of school for approval. Principals make sure teachers know about content coming from the head of school first before it goes to families. Our school is very intentional about the number of communications that go out to parents to ensure they read what they receive and don't get overloaded. We try to be very strategic about the amount of communications sent out in a day or a week.

► **Tracy:** What has your team done to adapt to COVID-19 for admissions procedures?

► **Nancy:** I've been doing a lot on the phone or through email. I've been sending all the website videos as well because that's far better than me showing them an empty school. As soon as we are able, I have a couple of families that will want to come in and see the school. We've seen a decline in applications. We have a lot of parents in the oil and gas industry, so even without COVID-19, we would have been affected.

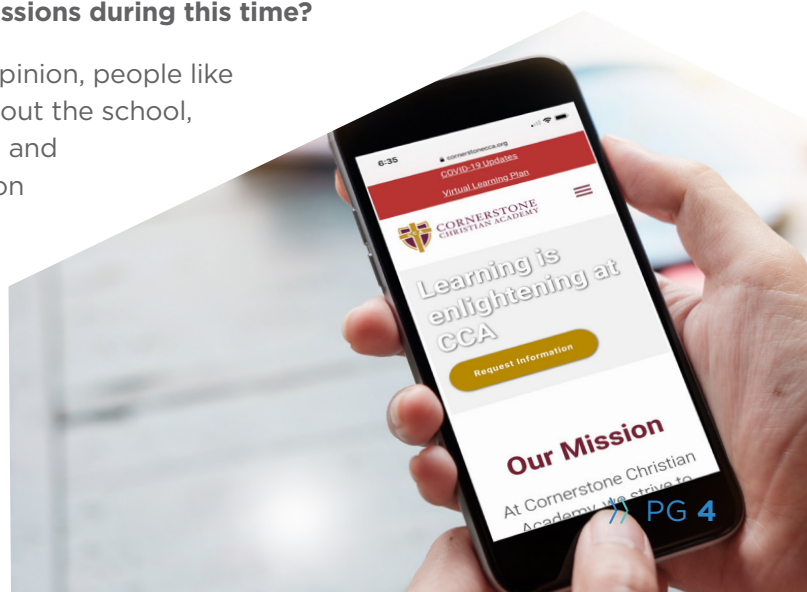
► **Tracy:** Is there anything you already had in place in addition to the videos that has been helpful to your admissions and marketing processes?

► **Nancy:** Our website has been a helpful resource. The website is about three years old. The website designer did a good job of creating a clean, modern design. We can easily change things. Prior to our current website, we used a platform that made it very difficult to make design changes or get it where we wanted it to be. I really think our current website is so easy to maintain and made it simple to market to families who might be looking at "who is doing what" for virtual learning or might be curious about what kind of school we are.

In addition to our website, we recently redid our [viewbook](#). I can send them out via email. It's broken down into the different grade areas. We had just gotten them three weeks before COVID-19 hit. We also had teachers overhaul their areas on the academic area of our website. Under the grade level areas, you'll see more information about each area of the school and curriculum overviews for each grade. Parents can see examples of what they will be learning throughout the year in that grade level.

► **Tracy:** Do you have any tips for pivoting to virtual admissions during this time?

► **Nancy:** Some people are doing virtual tours. But in my opinion, people like to be able to go to a website and dive in first, read all about the school, and be very knowledgeable about what is going on first, and then come back to the school and ask questions based on what they have seen. The tour comes after they've done their due diligence. It makes it a little bit more personal for each family. I always did personal tours at the school. I never had weekly tours for a big group. I mainly did that because I feel like they learn a lot about the school when it's one-on-one, but I learn a lot about them too. You may be walking around with someone and they tell you, "My child



has special needs, can your school help with that? Is this the right fit?" I think a lot of people go online now and need to see what they're looking for a little bit more than they did before. The website has become key for people in seeing whether they are truly interested in going in person to that school.

► **Tracy:** What are you doing to market your school differently?

- **Nancy:** We need to see, really and truly, where people are when they come off this and we will know a little bit more. We can market all day long, but until you actually see where parents are in terms of their jobs or financially, I really don't think you can give an educated guess on that. I think people will want to continue going, but will they be able to? We may have to get really creative with financial aid or maybe we won't need to. We may come out of it just fine or we may see more people because of the way we have done our virtual learning. There is so much unknown right now.
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► **Tracy:** Do you think there are things you are doing to market your school right now that are making a difference?

- **Jennifer:** Social media platforms are great marketing tools. Nancy does a great job. Parents and teachers are sending pictures of virtual learning. We had a good schedule going prior to this happening. At the beginning of the year we sat down with a calendar and said, "Here are the things going on each week." We assigned a teacher an individual week and that teacher has to send in pictures or an activity that week and we post it by Friday. They have requirements around this too. We don't want all fun pictures. We want academic pictures too. We decided that if you make the teacher responsible for doing it, they will do it. If you just say, "Hey everybody, send pictures," they'll forget.
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► **Tracy:** How are you handling tuition payments for the remainder of 19-20? And have you made any changes to tuition payments for 20-21?

- **Kristi:** If a family is in a crisis situation financially due to COVID-19, we have asked them to reach out. Otherwise, things are operating as normal and there are no changes at this time.
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► **Tracy:** How do you anticipate financial aid changing over the next year?

- **Kristi:** It will definitely increase and we have families who normally would not apply doing so. We will have an emergency aid type of contract and review it throughout the year. If their situation changes, then the aid will be removed or increased. FACTS Grant & Aid has been helpful during this process.

