

Hillside Family of Agencies

Strengthening Community, One Family at a Time

Founded in 1837 as the Rochester Female Association for the Relief of Orphans and Destitute Children, Hillside Family of Agencies is a multi-region network of affiliates, serving over 11,000 families with home- and community-based programs, residential treatment, foster care, emergency services, outpatient mental health services, juvenile justice programs, and more. Hillside's 177-year history of innovation and its successful, evidence-based programs drove significant expansion and acquisition, making it the largest social services provider in New York state. It also created great organizational complexity, resulting in competing priorities, an unfocused brand, a confused message, and a complicated reputation. With planning underway for a major long-term capital campaign to diversify from 88% government funding, MSDS was asked to help Hillside take a step back, find their focus, and communicate more effectively to their traditional audiences—while welcoming new ones to the organization.



Hillside: Before Rebranding

Given its dependence on government funding and referrals to support operations, branding and marketing were not areas of focus; allowing Hillside to focus resources towards developing programs that conformed with funding requirements. With government cutbacks creating increased competition for decreasing dollars, and recent healthcare reform dramatically changing the social service landscape, this under-investment in brand was no longer sustainable.

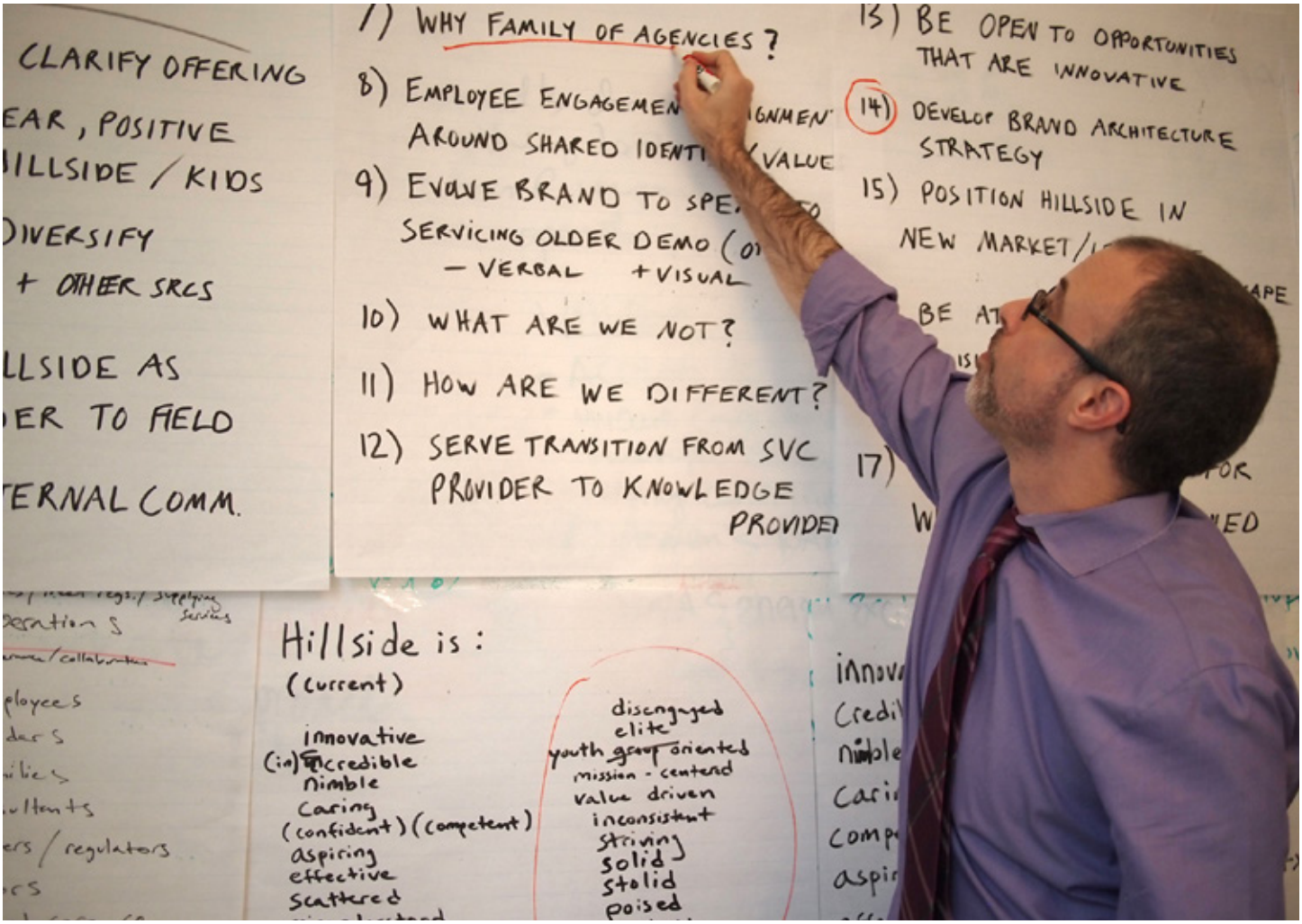
Hillside needed to not only reach private funders: for the first time, as patient choice became a greater part of decision process, they would have to win over families to seek their care rather then count on agency referrals. A patchwork of local freelance design and copywriting resources unfortunately resulted in inconsistent communications, mixed messages, and confusion about Hillside's brand. Meanwhile, internally, years of acquisition-fueled growth had created a confused brand with numerous sub-brands and service lines, differing understanding of Hillside's mission, and difficulty in establishing a unified Hillside culture built on clear organizational values.



Brand Discovery & Research

To give our strategy and design teams a deep understanding of Hillside's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges, discovery began with in-depth stakeholder surveys and interviews soliciting individual feedback, opinions, and insights from 32 different regional, program and executive leaders. To complement insights gained on Hillside's internal perceptions of itself, we read through stacks of Hillside research studies on customer and partner satisfaction, strategic planning documents and assessments, program materials, press clippings, and letters from patients and families.

We then turned our attention to Hillside's competitive set, taking a comprehensive look at similar organizations in multiple regions—gaining insight into the relative strengths and weaknesses of their service offerings and brands. Once completed, our findings were detailed in a research report, paving the way for deeper collaborative exploration.



Brand Workshops

With a comprehensive and detailed understanding of Hillside's history, mission, and services, the communities they serve, their peers, and more, our brand strategy team spent two days with 22 members of Hillside's leadership team conducting brand strategy workshops. In these focused brainstorming sessions, we collaboratively explored numerous facets of the organization—discussing and prioritizing our many goals for the rebranding, understanding the dynamics of Hillside's complex system of care, describing each of Hillside's many audience groups, listing current and aspirational descriptions for the organization, and more.

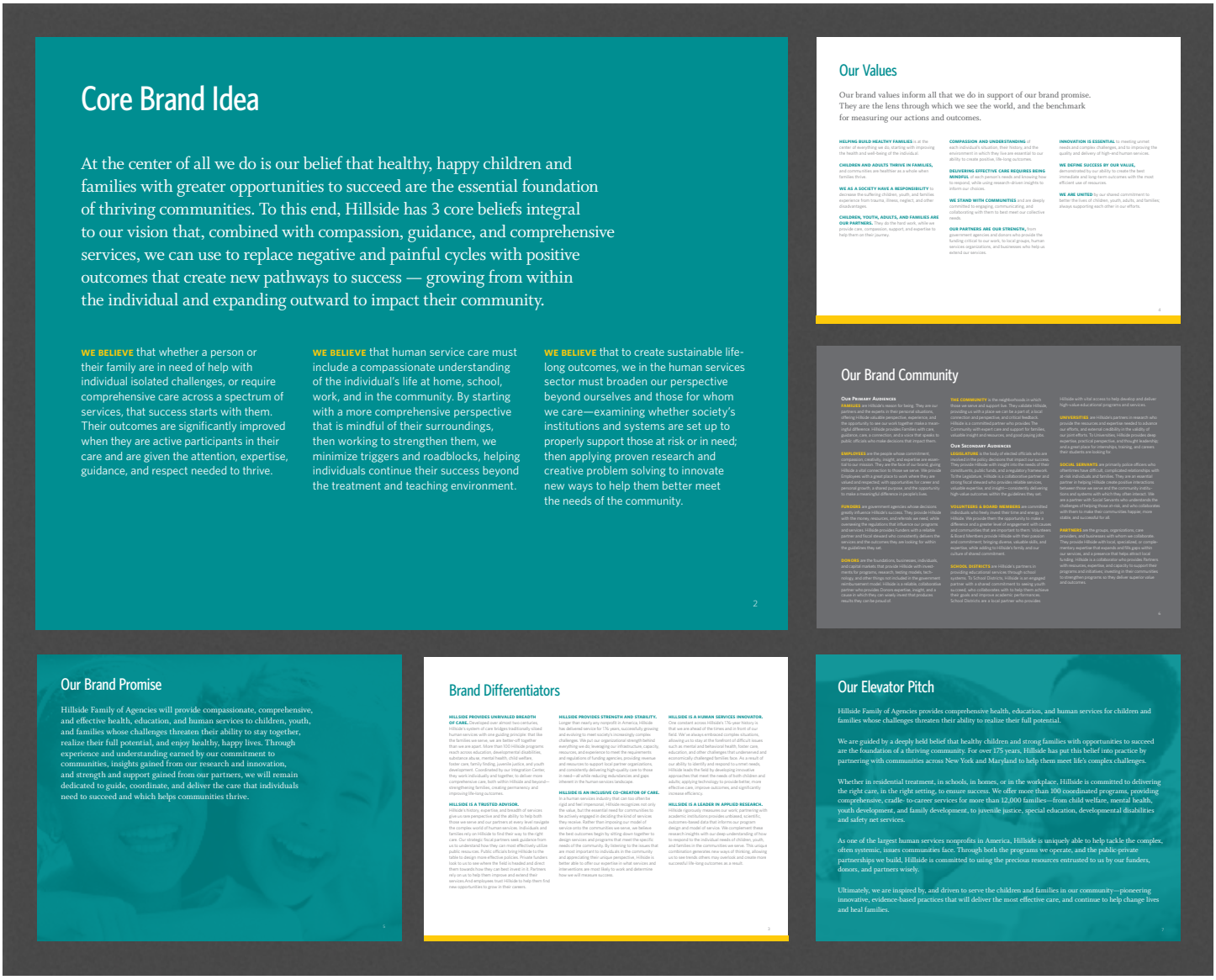
After transcribing audio recordings of our workshops, MSDS's brand strategy team synthesized takeaways and observations into a Brand Workshop Distillation, providing our foundation for development of brand strategy & messaging.



Brand Immersion

Surveys and workshops are great ways to learn about an nonprofit's history and brand—but for organizations that provide essential social services to underserved communities and those in need, you have to get closer. You have to hear, first-hand, the often challenging, sometimes magical, and always rewarding experiences of people for whom serving those in need is a life's calling. Only then can you appreciate the people and passion that go into helping change lives.

Alongside our internal research & discovery process, we immersed ourselves in Hillside's culture—spending two days touring many of Hillside's facilities; meeting with program directors, caregivers, and administrative staff; observing children coming and going from classes and treatment; being given tours of residential facilities by children with developmental disabilities who proudly lived in them; meeting with "skip-generation" grandmothers playing the role of primary caregiver, and more. The result was an enlightening, emotional, and heartwarming experience that added an invaluable dimension to our understanding of Hillside's brand.



Brand Strategy & Messaging

Following weeks of research, it was time to turn observations and insights into strategic positioning and concrete messaging that would express Hillside's brand to a diverse audience of families, communities, funders, partners, and more. We collaborated with Hillside's team until the strategic foundation for their brand had been fully articulated from many vantage points and in many formats—then developed a new tagline "*Strengthening Community, One Family at a Time.*" The result is a carefully crafted Brand Messaging Handbook that provides language to be drawn upon for marketing and fundraising communications. The handbook also serves as a guide for Hillside's hundreds of staff to "live" the brand—uniting them with a common vision, and helping deliver consistent audience experiences that embody Hillside's promise of value.



Visual Identity & Brand Guidelines

Much like Hillside's brand strategy was an evolution of its impressive 177-year history, clarifying the organization's vision moving forward, visual branding prioritized maintaining the equity in Hillside's well-known logo. We subtly but significantly transitioned their hand-crafted mark into a streamlined identity that keeps care for families as its focus, while reflecting Hillside's attributes of efficiency, financial strength, and innovative, evidence-based practices. Hillside's design system of affiliate logos, expanded colors, and type families are documented in Brand Guidelines to support ongoing development of professional and internally-created communications.



Roll-Out Plan

Concluding development of Hillside's new brand strategy and visual identity in December of 2014, we developed recommendations for a large-scale, phased rollout of Hillside's brand, targeting each of their core target audiences and suggesting a variety of venues and approaches for communications development.

Our Client's Take

"As a large organization with a wide geographic reach, many affiliates, and over 120 specialized programs, With many affiliates and over 120 programs, Hillside has often been challenged to communicate our message, both internally and externally. MSDS did a great job helping us create clarity amidst Hillside's complexity. They took the time to really know us—engaging our people, spending time at our facilities, and actively listening—then helped us articulate Hillside's story to our many audiences. The process was illuminating and rewarding. MSDS's work now supports all of our affiliates, development efforts, and communications—bringing us together and making us stronger as a result."

Dennis Richardson, President and CEO