

From NHS To Merakey—Rebranding In Action: An Interview With Leah Pason & Trish Pisauro Of Merakey



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Why do organizations in the behavioral health and social services field decide to rebrand? There are as many different possible answers as there are organizations to answer it, but two common answers are refreshing brand recognition and customer perception. The first one is fairly obvious. If consumers and payers don't know who you are, then that's the end of the game—consumers won't use your services and payers won't pay you to deliver them. The second one is also extremely important, but often overlooked—64% of consumers say shared values is the most important way to build trust between themselves and a “brand.”



This month, we had a chance to sit down and talk rebranding with these goals in mind, with Merakey Chief Strategy Officer, Leah Pason and Vice President of Marketing and Communications, Trish Pisauro. Merakey is a national non-profit organization that provides developmental (4,015 consumers), behavioral health (35,944 consumers), and education (1,468 consumers) services through 1,194 different programs at 779 sites and employs almost 10,000 staff. In 2018, Merakey reported \$549,751,844 in revenue that included \$206 million for behavioral health services, \$280 million in intellectual and development disability services, and \$32 million in education and autism services (see [Merakey 2018 Annual Report](#))

Last April, Merakey undertook a rebranding initiative, moving from the name NHS, to Merakey. Founded in 1969 as the Northwest Center, Merakey was also recognized previously as Northwestern, NHS Human Services, and NHS. All former and affiliate sites were renamed to Merakey, while its corporate headquarters remained in Lafayette Hill, Pennsylvania.

Why did your organization decide to rebrand?

Ms. Pason explained that in 2014, a new CEO joined then-NHS and after one year the organizations looked at the state of the industry and decided it needed to launch a “comprehensive strategic planning process.” She explained, “Over the next five months, we looked at trends and stakeholder thoughts. We wanted to get as much feedback

from our employees and staff at all levels as possible. We also reached out to our stakeholders, payers, funders, advocacy groups, and consumers to solicit feedback.”

Out of that process they uncovered two critical themes that drove the rebrand.

Name recognition—“People didn’t know who NHS was, or the breadth of what we did,” Ms. Pason said. “It was a clunky name, and there wasn’t a good, easy, and compelling story to tell. That name simply didn’t have a compelling meaning that brought the organization together.”

Unifying culture—“We also developed the theme to build a unifying culture,” Ms. Pason said. “Through localized growth we had a lot of localized names. We felt we needed to create a new brand, a new name, and an identity to bring us all together. That feedback came from all levels of the organization, and it was necessary for us to move out of Northwest Philadelphia and to be a real national player. NHS was also an acronym for other places, so if you googled, you got other organizations like National Honor Society.”

In June 2016, then-NHS launched its new strategic plan to over 500 managers in the organization. They identified where they needed to execute on the plan, and the needed investment to move the needle to the identified strategic goals. Ms. Pason explained:

In our first decision, we had a communication team that shared information with our team. But we didn’t have a leader with expertise or broader external experience with branding. One of the most significant conversations we had was, what do we need to do as an organization to have the compelling name recognition at a national level?

Why and how did you choose your new branding?

Ms. Pason and Ms. Pisauro both explained that one of their main goals was to have the ability to tell a compelling story and tell it very quickly. Ms. Pisauro explained that after working with an outside consulting firm, “The theme that kept coming up again and again was that we are problem solvers. We don’t try to fit the square peg in the round hall of one model.”

With that in mind, they took a lot of possible choices for a new brand to the whole team, and through what Ms. Pason called “a comprehensive process” that involved the whole organization and took special care to remain transparent, they came up with Merakey. Press releases from that time explained the new name this way: “Merakey is inspired by the modern Greek word “Meraki,” which means to put something of yourself into your work, or to do something with soul, creativity, or love” (see [NHS Introduces New Name and Logo as “Merakey”](#)). Ms. Pisauro explained the process:

One thing we did that really went well was to cascade down from the leadership out, and also use a bottom up ground swell. Everyone was involved, everyone had a part with constant communication. We asked, what does the brand look like and how will this affect you? We made sure we attacked it every way we could. The rebrand was a constant theme, to make sure everyone knew what it meant to them.

Part of the effort included special attention paid to designing a new logo, which Ms. Pisauro needed to be based on the NHS blue, but to also give a nod to the different divisions of the company. This means that the new logo, which includes an interlocking heart, is made up of four primary services: purple represents behavioral health; green represents intellectual and developmental disabilities; cyan represents education and autism, and blue represents the administration.

And then there was “the swagger,” as Ms. Pason put it. She explained:

There were launch parties across 700 sites, which was key to keep people excited. In the morning we all arrived as NHS, [and in the evening we left Merakey]. It generated so much excitement, and then for the next four months, all the heavy lifting was done behind the scenes. We had to change all the licenses, billing, account, and legal entities. The planning and the details that were put into place made it very easy.

Did your re-branding have the impact that you hoped it would? What lessons did you learn?

Ms. Pisauro’s answer to both impact and lessons was direct—communication was key, and it needed to be constant. And, organizations need to be ready for the “big pull” from the legal and finance teams to navigate all the changes that must happen on those fronts. She explained:

Internally it’s had more of an impact than originally desired. For our culture and identity, it has been huge and better than we ever dreamed of. Externally, our focus was on the build and getting the name out there. The biggest lesson—the difficulty with regulations make it difficult to shift names. This was a big pull on the legal team and finance team. We also had 100s of programs that needed updated licenses, and that was a significant lift.

Ms. Pason noted that having a strategic plan and a team that was on board were key resources to successfully rebranding the organizations. She noted:

Our strategic plan made it easier, and the way we incorporated all the staff and setting the stage of why we were doing it. People were really excited and embraced the roll out. We have a project manager, and that person along with Trish brainstormed all the action requirements, and anywhere we can figure out a potential impact that helped coordinate across all departments and the breadth of the organization.

And finally, there was the money. Like most non-profits, Merakey had to manage their budget very closely, decide what had to be done in house, delay some costs like annual marketing material that would need changed again immediately after the launch, and phase changes in so that they could manage the budget. Ms. Pisauro said, “We are super proud of the budget. We did this on a shoe string budget and phased everything in. We had both leadership and the rollout at the same time. And we did the same thing with the video access.”

For more on rebranding in the health and human service market, check out [Health & Human Service Rebranding In 2018 – New Market Positioning Mergers & Acquisitions Lead The Trend](#).