The power of branding

I've had lots of occasion this past week to think about branding as I led writing groups for a business school class on marketing. The undergrads had to write a marketing paper dealing with some sort of marketing strategy. Most of them wrote about "brand extension," where a new product is introduced under the existing brand name. The students had a bit of trouble relating theory to real world practice, but if anyone doubts the power of marketing and branding, they should look no further than this article in yesterday's *Washington Post*. The article talks about how exposure to certain brands (Coke is one of them) actually fires up areas in the brain that are also akin to RELIGIOUS experience. Why? Because marketers have spent years creating messaging that forms emotional connections for the brand. Of course, Coke is the prime example. I think it has the highest (here's another marketing term) brand equity of all brands. It logo is instantly recognizable, and they have had a particularly successful marketing campaign. When we think of Coke we may think "a Coke and a smile" or Santa or fuzzy bears or any number of campaigns designed to appeal to our emotions. The bottom line is that good marketing and branding do work to create positive associations.

Most everything that we are exposed to through the media has a (yet another marketing term) brand essence or personality. We associate certain behaviors/attributes/lifestyles/etc. to certain brands/products/people and countries? At least Howard Fineman of *Newsweek* seems to think that countries have brand personalities. And perhaps they do. However, he writes that Barack Obama is engaging in a branding exercise for the United States simply by the choices he's making for cabinet positions. Although I agree with the premise, I think Fineman is a bit sketchy on the details.

Bottom line: branding works. When something is not well known,

it is because that something does not have a strong brand identity. Branding works for products (how many people out there have a preference Coke versus Pepsi versus store cola?) and it works for organizations. Apparently, branding also works for countries (let’s see…England is traditional, some might say stodgy, Iran, more apt to incite violence, New Zealand has lots of dairy…).