A Brief Primer on Brands and Branding

What does the word 'brand' mean?

The words brand and branding are thrown around liberally by all sorts of people in different contexts and with different meanings in mind, so it may help to start by asking 'what exactly is a brand?'

The simplest answer is that a brand is a set of associations that a person (or group of people) makes with a company, product, service, individual or organization. These associations may be intentional – that is, they may be actively promoted via marketing and corporate identity, for example – or they may be outside the company's control. For example, a poor press review for a new product might 'harm' the product manufacturer's overall brand by placing negative associations in people's minds.

To illustrate this, let's explore one of the world's best-known products – or brands: Coca-Cola.

Essentially, it is just a soft drink product, but Coca-Cola the drink is eclipsed by the sheer might of Coca-Cola the brand. This phenomenon is best summed up by the following quote from a Coca-Cola executive: *'If Coca-Cola were to lose all of its production-related assets in a disaster, the company would survive. By contrast, if all consumers were to have a sudden lapse of memory and forget everything related to Coca-Cola, the company would go out of business.'*

So what are these all-powerful associations? For Coca-Cola, typical perceptions might be that it is the original cola drink ('The Real Thing'), that its recipe is secret and unsurpassed, that it's all-American or maybe global, that it's youthful, energetic, refreshing and so on. Visual associations might include the unmistakable red and white logo and corporate colors, or the unique shape and tint of the original glass bottles.

These are positive brand associations, but there may be negative ones too. For example, Coca-Cola may be seen as unhealthy, or as a symbol of global 'imperialism' by American brands. What is seen as a positive association to some may be unpleasant to others and negative perceptions could become attached to a brand's identity even if the company strives to present a different character.

Of course, brands aren't limited to the food and drink category. If a brand is just a set of associations then practically anything could be said to have a brand, even individuals – think Michael Jordan or Derek Jeter.

Now think about NFHP in this context. Does NFHP have brand? Or is it a just a logo? Perhaps in our minds, the logo stands for something, but what about everyday citizens? Anglers? Politicians? What do they think about NFHP? Do they even know about it? What about communities with NFHP projects are located? What about corporations in communities where NFHP projects are located? What, if anything, do these entities think about NFHP?

What is branding?

If a brand results from a set of associations and perceptions in people's minds, then branding is an attempt to harness, generate, influence and control these associations to help the business perform better. Any organization can benefit enormously by creating a brand that presents the organization as distinctive, trusted, exciting, reliable or whichever attributes are appropriate to that entity.