

Company of the Month: Richard Branson and Virgin

One of the leading British-based businessmen and entrepreneurs is Richard Branson. Although he is now 56 years old, his youthful, smiling face still communicates a young man's enthusiasm. As leader of the Virgin Group, his interests range from soft drinks (Virgin Cola) and mobile telephones (Virgin Mobile) to trains (Virgin Trains) and international airlines (Virgin Atlantic).

Like many successful business people, Richard Branson's zest for business started when he was just a school boy. Although he was not a brilliant pupil because of dyslexia, he started his first business at the age of 16 publishing *Student* magazine. He then started Virgin records which originally sold records by mail order. Virgin Records opened its first shop on Oxford Street (London's most important shopping street) very soon after. In 1972, when he was 22 years old, Richard Branson started his own record company. Their first record, the brilliant *Tubular Bells* by the multi-instrumentalist, Mike Oldfield was released in 1973. This record was an enormous success and the music was later used, very effectively, on the soundtrack of the film *The Exorcist*.

When punk music started, he signed the outrageous *Sex Pistols* who had been refused by most other record companies. This courageous decision turned out to be a marketing coup. The business flourished and many more important music stars joined Virgin Records, including Peter Gabriel, Genesis, Simple Minds and the Rolling Stones. Soon Virgin Records became a major player in the rather conservative British record industry.

Since then, the Virgin brand name has appeared in air and rail travel, mobile phones, retail outlets (Virgin Megastores), the internet, drinks, hotels and the leisure industry. Richard Branson has always been an enthusiastic self-publicist. In 1985 he set out from New York in an attempt to beat the record for an Atlantic crossing by boat. Less than one hundred miles from the destination, the boat hit some driftwood and sank. Richard Branson and his crew were rescued but the adventure made the names of Richard Branson and his company Virgin famous around the world.

Richard Branson is not a great musician, engineer, inventor of soft drinks or expert on airlines or trains. What does Richard Branson contribute to businesses?

"We look for opportunities where we can offer something better, fresher, and more valuable, and we seize them. We often move into areas where the customer has traditionally received a poor deal, and where the competition is complacent."

And with our growing e-commerce activities, we also look to deliver ‘old’ products in new ways. We are pro-active and quick to act, often leaving bigger and more cumbersome organisations in our wake.

When we start a new venture, we base it on hard research and analysis. Typically, we review the industry and put ourselves in the customer’s shoes to see what could make it better. ”

As we have seen Richard Branson has applied these principles successfully in many industries.

In 2004 he started Virgin Galactic, a company which will offer space tourism.

Richard Branson has ten secrets to success:

1. You’ve got to challenge the big ones.
2. Keep it casual.
3. Haggle: everything is negotiable.
4. Have fun working.
5. Do the right things for the brand.
6. Smile for the cameras!
7. Don’t lead ‘sheep’, herd ‘cats’.
8. Move like a bullet.
9. Size does matter.
10. Be a common, regular person.

Exercises

A) Match the words from the box to the definitions below.

entrepreneur	zest	dyslexia	mail order	punk music
outrageous	flourished	conservative	self-publicist	driftwood
complacent	pro-active	cumbersome	in our wake	haggle

1. *n* eager interest and enjoyment
2. *v* to argue when you are trying to agree the price of something
3. *adj* pleased with a situation, especially with something you have achieved
4. *adj* behind or after someone or something
5. *n* a condition that makes it difficult for someone to read and spell
6. *n* wood floating in the sea or left on the shore
7. *adj* slow, difficult, heavy, complicated
8. *adj* not liking changes or new ideas
9. *adj* very shocking and extremely unfair or offensive
10. *adj* making things happen or change rather than reacting to events
11. *n* a method of buying and selling in which the buyer chooses good at home and orders them from a company which sends them by post



12. *n* someone who starts a new business or arranges business deals in order to make money, often in a way that involves financial risks.
13. *v* to develop and be successful
14. *n* a person who works to become well known
15. *n* a type of loud music popular in the late 1970s and 1980s

B Now use the words from the box to complete the sentences below.

1. We made a fire with the _____ we found on the beach.
2. The newspaper often made _____ attacks on politicians and public figures.
3. You will save a lot of money if you _____ with the shopkeeper.
4. They have done some wonderful things in the past but I think they're becoming _____.
5. The seeds I planted _____ in the rich, warm earth and gave me a good harvest.
6. The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra does not play _____!
7. We need more young people with fresh ideas to bring some _____ to the company.
8. The elephant is a very strong but _____ animal.
9. The tourist guide led the way holding a Spanish flag and we all followed _____ her _____.
10. In a democracy a politician needs to be a _____. People won't vote for you if they don't know you!
11. I don't buy my clothes in shops. I get them by _____.
12. When you are travelling, don't be _____. Always try new things!
13. We can't just wait for the next accident to happen. We must be _____ and get prepared.
14. I'm not an _____ because I don't like taking risks.
15. The school has special classes for children with _____.

Discussion

A Read Richard Branson's ten secrets again. What do they mean? Do you agree with them?

1. You've got to challenge the big ones.
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