

**RICHARD
BRANSON**

THE NO.1 INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

**SCREW
IT, LET'S
DO IT**



**Lessons in Life
and Business**

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

Preface: The Bigger Picture

1. Just Do It!

2. Have Fun!

3. Be Bold

4. Challenge Yourself

5. Stand on Your Own Feet

6. Live The Moment

7. Value Family and Friends

8. Have Respect

9. Gaia Capitalism

10. Sex Appeal

11. Be Innovative

12. Do Some Good

13. Pow! Shazam!

14. Think Young

Epilogue

Index

Copyright

About the Book

I have been fortunate to achieve a great many things in my life so far. Now I want to share the secrets of that success with you and help you reach your own goals in business and in life.

I believe that business can create a better world by building entrepreneurial companies that help rather than damage the planet. I will explain how companies like Virgin can lead the way and how I am using this belief to take my business into the future. I'll share the lessons I've learned over the years, together with the good advice and inspirational words that have changed my life.

No matter what you want to achieve, no matter what you want to do, you *can* make it happen: you just have to take the first step. I hope these lessons inspire and motivate you to reach your own potential. So go on, get out there and do it!

About the Author

Richard Branson is chairman of the Virgin Group. He was born in 1950 and educated at Stowe School, where he set up *Student* magazine when he was sixteen years old. In 1970 he founded Virgin as a mail order record retailer, and shortly afterwards opened a record shop on London's Oxford Street. Two years later the company built a recording studio and Virgin Records went on to become one of the top six record companies in the world.

Since then the Virgin Group has expanded to encompass around two hundred companies in over thirty countries. Richard is the only person in the world to have built eight billion-dollar companies from scratch in eight different sectors. He recently established the \$25 million Virgin Earth Challenge and has pledged £200 million for renewable energy projects. Through the Virgin Group's charitable arm, Unite, Richard is working to develop new approaches to social and environmental problems.

Richard's autobiography, *Losing My Virginity*, and his books on business, *Screw It, Let's Do It* and *Business Stripped Bare*, are all international bestsellers. He lives on Necker Island in the British Virgin Islands and is married with two grown-up children.

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Screw It, Let's Do It

Lessons in Life and Business

Richard Branson



Preface: The Bigger Picture

I was first invited to write *Screw It, Let's Do It* for World Book Day 2006. The idea was to offer something enjoyable and inspirational to emergent readers that would encourage them to pick up books and read more.

The first edition of my little book did far better than I ever dreamed it would. It sold all around the world, reaching No. 1 in South Africa as well as the bestseller list in Australia. I was enormously gratified by the degree of enthusiasm with which it was received. Many people wrote to me saying how much the book had encouraged and inspired them. I also discovered that it had reached out far beyond the emergent readers for whom it had been written.

A year on, I was asked if I'd like to write a revised and expanded version for a wider readership. In this new edition you will find all my original lessons in life as well as new ones that look to the future.

Though I have never followed the rules, at every step I learned many lessons along the way. They began at home when I was young. They continued at school and in business, when I ran *Student* magazine in my teens. I am still learning and hope I never stop. These lessons have held me in good stead throughout my life and I hope that you will find something in these pages that might inspire you.

Newspapers call my partners and me at Virgin 'Mavericks in Paradise' - perhaps because I own two idyllic

tropical islands; one in the Caribbean and one off the coast of northern Australia. There's no doubt that we tend to do things in a less stuffy way than most businesses, and for me, it works. I work hard and I play hard. I believe in goals. It's never a bad thing to have a dream, but always I'm practical about it. I don't fantasise and sit daydreaming about the impossible. I set goals and then work out how to achieve them. Anything I want to do in life I want to do well and not half-heartedly. At school, I found reading and writing hard. Back then, dyslexia wasn't understood and my teachers thought I was lazy. So I taught myself to learn things by heart. Now I have a very good memory. It has become one of my best tools in business.

We have come a very long way since I launched Virgin back in 1967. We started small and grew big. Sometimes the pace of our expansion into numerous fields and enterprises, from cola, to wine, wedding gowns to mobile phones, books, comics, animation, credit cards, planes, trains and even space travel, seems incredible. Nothing seems impossible or too big to tackle. Virgin really does wholeheartedly embrace my maxim 'Screw It, Let's Do It', and I love to see the enthusiasm and energy generated by our team. I relish it when we take on a new idea and make it fly.

But we are now into the new millennium and the old ideas that industry is king and the devil take the hindmost are changing. With huge leaps in science and our understanding of the way the Earth and the Universe work, we have come to realise that everything is linked; nothing stands alone or acts on its own. For every act there is a consequence. Because of this, I feel it is very important to know how Virgin is going to work in the twenty-first century.

On a global level, the behaviour of people, industries and enterprises has immediate and often long-term effects on our world. If mankind makes a mistake, it can be

catastrophic. On a personal level, Virgin employs over 50,000 people, and their livelihoods will be affected if we don't succeed in all the many areas we have established ourselves. As a businessman, of course, I want to get on and be successful, and sometimes the cheaper option in manufacturing methods seems the better one. But one of my rules is: *Do no harm*.

It seems to me that, along with my responsibility as chairman of one of the world's most successful and entrepreneurial companies, I have a responsibility and duty, as much as is humanly possible, to ensure that we do no harm. I have taken to heart the fact that everything we do touches something, or someone, somewhere.

For a long time I have been drawn to the Gaia Theory, a hypothesis formulated by James Lovelock almost forty years ago, which states that the Earth is a living entity, like a single cell, and, like a single cell, everything it needs for its existence is contained within it. Moreover, Professor Lovelock believes that the planet can heal itself if damaged. But even with Gaia there is a point of no return, beyond which the damage could be irreversible. Environmental scientists have warned us that the pace of development and industry, as well as the loss of vast tracts of rainforest, has released so much CO₂ into the atmosphere we have entered into a cycle of global warming which could lead to the destruction of most forms of life on Earth. This is happening *now*. We must put the environment first if we are to survive.

As a capitalist I faced a stark question: was I doing harm? Careful research and investigation revealed that there was a way in which I could be a capitalist and still embrace my long-held environmental philosophy. By looking at ways in which Virgin could develop new fuels to reduce carbon emissions, we could help to reverse global warming. We could also take steps to make our group of

companies more environmentally responsible. I coined the phrase 'Gaia Capitalism' as a tenet, a catchy phrase, and as a way forward.

I have come to realise that while industry and enterprise exist on a wide-scale commercial level, they don't have to be bad. Of course we all want to have refrigerators, drive cars, hop on planes and trains, live our normal, busy and satisfying lives. But at the same time, we must be more aware of how our actions damage our environment. I believe that it is up to big companies like Virgin to lead the way with a holistic approach, one which, while creating and maintaining successful, entrepreneurial companies, also helps maintain the balance of nature and does as little harm as possible.

Virgin can do this because we are a private company. I don't believe in going by the book. I will change things where I can if it's for the better and I will work by setting an example. In this I have been influenced by many good and brilliant people. As well as James Lovelock, I draw inspiration from the ideas of my relative, Sir Peter Scott, who set up the World Wildlife Fund before his death; Jonathon Porritt, co-founder of Forum for the Future (and founder of Greenpeace); Australian scientist and environmentalist, Tim Flannery, who says in his groundbreaking book, *The Weathermakers*, that we can all influence the global climate in a positive way; and Al Gore, who has made it his mission through his film and book, *An Inconvenient Truth*, to get the message across that the world is on the brink of an environmental catastrophe.

My new goal in life is to work at reducing carbon emissions. This is why in Virgin over the coming months and years, we will be looking at every scientific advance, every development - and perhaps offering a few ourselves - that will make for a more organic and holistic approach to business. The future is exciting. We could be on the

threshold of a Renaissance not only of the way we all live but also of enterprise and invention.

Related to this, Virgin Unite was set up as a charitable foundation to support a network of grass-roots charities that make a difference on both local and global levels. We encourage our staff and customers to get involved, to volunteer, and in this way we are making a difference in many areas, particularly in helping with really tough problems, like malaria, AIDS, HIV and TB.

Education is a key element of this and Virgin has always worked hard for charity and to help the young through Virgin Unite, but I want us to get more involved in innovative ideas where education is concerned. I have already founded a School of Enterprise at South Africa's CIBA University; and will develop a travelling international university with a tented campus. I believe also that we need less politicising and more wisdom, so a key element of my way forward is to establish a Council of Elders, who will offer advice when asked by world leaders. I am honoured that Nelson Mandela has agreed to be the founding father.

When I was starting out in life, things were more certain. You had a career lined up, often the same one your father followed. Most mothers of course stayed at home. Today nothing is sure; life can be one long struggle. People have to decide on priorities if they want to get anywhere. The best lesson I learned was to *just do it*. Whatever it is, however hard and daunting it might seem, as that ancient Greek, Plato, said, 'The beginning is the most important part of any work,' while the Chinese say, 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.'

If you look ahead to the end, and all the miles between, with all the dangers you might face, you might never take that first step. Whatever it is you want to achieve in life, if you don't make the effort, you won't reach your goal.

Take that first step. There will be many challenges. You might get a few knock-backs - but in the end, you will make

it.

Good luck!

Richard Branson

1 Just Do It!

Believe it can be done

Have goals

Live life to the full

Never give up

Prepare well

Have faith in yourself

Try and try again

Help each other

When I first discovered that my nickname among some members of staff at Virgin was 'Dr Yes', I was amused. Obviously, it had come about because my automatic response to a question, a request, or a problem is more likely to be positive than negative. I have always tried to find reasons to do something if it seems like a good idea, than not to do it.

My motto really is: 'Screw it - just do it!'

I know many people say 'no', or 'let me think about it', as an almost Pavlovian response when asked a question, whether it's about something small and insignificant or big and revolutionary. Perhaps they are over-cautious, or suspicious of new ideas, or simply need time to think. But that's not my way of going about things. If something is a good idea, my way is to say 'Yes, I'll consider it' - and then to work out how to make it happen. Of course, I don't say

yes to everything. But what is worse: making the occasional mistake or having a closed mind and missing opportunities?

I believe in using and harnessing other people's knowledge and experience, which is why I like to work holistically, within a team. Harnessing energy is like harnessing brainpower. What's the point of selecting someone for a particular task if you ignore his or her experience and ability? It's like consulting experts and not even considering their advice.

I also trust my own instinct and ability to do almost anything I set my mind to. If an idea or project is good and worthwhile, if it's humanly possible I'll always consider it seriously, even if I have never done it, or thought about it, before. I will never say, 'I can't do this because I don't know how to.' I'll ask people, look into it, find a way. Looking, listening, learning - these are things we should do all our lives, not just at school.

Then there are those silly little rules that someone has invented for baffling reasons. I always think that if you set up quangos or committees, they will find something useless to do. The world is full of red tape, created by committees with too much time and an overbearing desire for control. Most red tape is a tangled mess of utterly useless, nonsensical jargon. If I want to do something worthwhile - or even just for fun - I won't let silly rules stop me. I will find a legal way around rules and give it a go. I tell my staff, 'If you want to do it, just do it.' That way, we all benefit. The staff's work and ideas are valued, they feel good about themselves and Virgin gains from their input and drive. People generally don't leave their jobs through lack of pay - they leave because they aren't valued. Many companies put their people in boxes - if you are a switchboard operator, you are always a switchboard operator. But we value our people and encourage them to be adaptable and innovative.

If you recognise something is a good idea, or if there's something in your personal life that you want to do, but aren't immediately sure how to achieve your goal, I don't believe that that little word '*can't*' should stop you. If you don't have the right experience to reach your goal, go in another direction, look for a different way in. There's always a solution to the most complex problem. If you want to fly, get down to the airfield at the age of sixteen and make the tea. Keep your eyes open. Look and learn. You don't have to go to art school to be a fashion designer. Join a fashion company and push a broom. Work your way up.

My mum, Eve, is a perfect example of this. When the war started, she wanted to be a pilot. She was so determined that, despite the fact that she had never learned to fly, she knew she could and would do it. Instead of brooding and dreaming, she went to Heston airfield, close to where she lived, and asked for a job to get her foot on the ladder. On asking what her chances of flying were, she was told only men could be pilots. This didn't deter her - in fact, if anything, she looked on it as a challenge. She got one of the instructors on her side and he told her to disguise herself as a man. Mum was very pretty and had been a dancer on stage, so it was obvious that she didn't *look* like a man, but audaciously, she got hold of a leather flying jacket, hid her blonde hair under a leather helmet and practised speaking with a deep voice. And she got the job she wanted - as she knew she would. All it had taken was ingenuity and grit. She learned how to glide and began to teach the new pilots. These were the young men who flew fighter planes in the Battle of Britain. Later, she became a Wren and helped service the boats that carried troops to France. Modern girls like my mum played a huge role in the war as intelligence agents, munitions workers, in the armed forces or the land army. All of them rolled up their sleeves and got on with what needed to be done.

After the war, airlines were a new business opportunity and Mum decided she wanted to be an air hostess as a means of seeing the world. But back then, air hostesses had to speak Spanish and be trained as nurses. Again, Mum didn't let the rules and red tape stop her. She chatted up the night porter at British South American Airways, a fledgling airline that operated Lancasters and Yorks between London and South America, and he secretly put her name on the list. These planes were the first passenger jet planes, so history was being made. Soon, she was an air hostess. She still couldn't speak Spanish and wasn't a nurse, but she had used her wits to achieve her goal. She just did it. Interestingly, those early passenger planes carried only a handful of passengers, 13 in the Lancaster and 21 in the York, and there was probably more of a sense of camaraderie during the long flights. You also had to be quite brave to fly to remote places. The planes were unpressurised, fragile boxes and oxygen masks had to be worn over the Andes. A year later, BOAC (British Overseas Airways Corporation) took over BSAA and Mum switched to the Bermuda run in Tudor aircraft. The first exploded; Mum was in the second one; the third disappeared in the Bermuda Triangle. The Tudors were grounded, but she continued to fly until she married my dad - a young barrister - who proposed to her while they were bombing along on his motorbike during one of her leaves.

Mum wasn't the only person in our family who said, 'Let's do it!'

The famous explorer Captain Robert Scott was my grandfather's cousin. A man of great courage, he made two trips to the Antarctic as a step in his goal of being the first man to the South Pole. Travelling to either one of the Poles was always an incredibly risky and daring venture in those early years because there was no special equipment, no lightweight, insulated clothing - in fact, bizarre as it sounds, Polar explorers wore their everyday winter

clothing, but piled on the layers. Some of them even wore ordinary hats and woollen mittens. Given the high degree of failure - and failure meant certain death - people insisted it couldn't be done. Scott said, 'I can do it' - and he did. He reached the South Pole in 1912, but, because he had delayed until the weather was milder, for the sake of his pack ponies and sledge dogs, he was second. Roald Amundsen, who took only dogs and left in the depth of the Polar winter, was the first. It was a terrible blow for Scott. Worn out and ill, he and his men died on the return journey. Yes, he had made the first balloon flight over Antarctica - an amazing and highly dangerous feat - but people don't remember that. They just say, poor old Scott, he was brave, but lost the race. Winning gives you a buzz, but people shouldn't be embarrassed if they don't come first. Having a go is the important thing, and even if you come second, third or fourth, you'll know that you did your best.

I'm going to spend some time outlining my first real commercial project - *Student* magazine - because I believe my methodology was good and, I also believe, a good example of 'just doing it'. I started *Student* when I was fifteen years old and still at Stowe, the boarding school I went to. I didn't do it to make money - I did it because I wanted to edit a magazine. I didn't like the way I was being taught at school, or what was going on in the world, and I wanted to put it right. A big reason for starting the magazine was to have a platform to protest against the escalation of the Vietnam War. Large numbers of US combat troops began to arrive in Vietnam in 1965 under President Lyndon B. Johnson, and we were reading of aerial bombing campaigns of cities and roads in North Vietnam. Chemical defoliants were also indiscriminately sprayed from the air. It seemed pointless and wrong.

Like many other fledgling entrepreneurs, I didn't see my idea as 'business' but as a politically motivated, though fun,

creative enterprise. To me, businessmen worked in the City, smoked fat cigars, and wore pinstriped suits. It didn't occur to me that businessmen could come in all shapes and sizes and backgrounds because, until then, they mostly followed the expected formula. I'd already had some early forays into making money with trying to sell rabbits, budgerigars and Christmas trees (more on those later). Where *Student* was concerned, there was a high degree of trial and error in my efforts; but then, I was only a schoolboy. However, almost instinctively, I followed the basic financial rules of preparing a sound business plan. Charles Dickens' character Mr Micawber in *David Copperfield* had it right when he said, 'Annual income £20, annual expenditure £19-19s-6d, result happiness! Annual income £20, annual expenditure £20-0s-6d, result misery!' Thanks to my parents' careful juggling with money as we were growing up I knew that income had to exceed outgoings. Profit should be the one and only commercial raison d'être in business, however much fun and enjoyment you get from it. An unprofitable business is a headache, a source of stress, and fiscal madness.

When I told friends and acquaintances that I intended to produce a proper magazine for sale on a professional, commercial scale, and asked for advice and journalistic contributions, I was confronted with some degree of disbelief, scepticism and even hoots of laughter. They treated my project like just another schoolboy enthusiasm. One or two shrugged and said I was too young and had no experience. But I was serious - I really believed in myself, believed it could be done and wanted to prove them wrong. I've always been stubborn and, if anything, their negativity strengthened my resolve and made me all the more determined.

For someone who wasn't all that academic, I had the contrary ambition of becoming a journalist when I left school. I wanted to travel the world, interviewing people

and filing my stories. 'Foreign correspondent' had a romantic ring to it. Obviously, I was a bit young and inexperienced to actually be a foreign correspondent - so instead I got the idea of publishing a magazine. At Stowe, we already had our own school magazine, *The Stoic*, but we couldn't publish dissident and revolutionary thoughts in it - for example, rants against fagging, beatings, compulsory chapel, Latin and all those traditions that every schoolboy in Britain hated or resented - and this is why I got the idea of producing a kind of renegade magazine. It wasn't a wild leap from planning one just for Stowe to deciding that *all* the sixth formers in England would want a copy. I got my schoolmate, Jonny Gems, involved as my co-conspirator and we decided that it would have a wider appeal if we solicited articles from students at other schools and got a forum going. We were convinced that such a magazine would make waves and change the way things had been done for centuries.

I got out a notebook and started to jot down a few thoughts, starting with some ideas for titles first. *Today, 1966, Focus!, Modern Britain, Interview*. It was a bold start. I then listed the kind of articles I wanted to publish that I thought would inspire my readers. The next step was to work out distribution, circulation and costs. In the school library, instead of doing my prep, I went through *Who's Who*, and made a list of 250 MPs, and then made a similar list of possible advertisers by carefully scouring the telephone directory. I wrote everything down in my lined notebook, including my philosophy and the format. The philosophy paragraph read:

A new political magazine with the aim of getting every public school boy more interested in politics and to know about the improvements and 'goings on' at every other public school in

the country. Contributors would include other schoolboys, members of the public and MPs.

I started a fresh page, at the top of which I wrote: *Letters to write* and underlined it. Beneath, I wrote, '300 public school masters: $3 \times 300 = 600d$ '. (This was for stamps on letters to ask for permission to sell the magazine at their schools. A 'd' was an old penny of which there were 240 to a pound.) Under that, I wrote, 'envelopes, writing paper, 300d. Total, 75 shillings = £3.17.6d' (or £3.75 in modern money). By the time I had finished my sums - 1,000 copies printed to be sold at 1/6 (7.5p), postage, and commission to shops - I was staring at a deficit.

It didn't take us long to work out that overheads and anticipated sales in such a limited circulation area didn't add up. We'd have gone bust before we even started; not a very auspicious start to my entrepreneurial aspirations. Back to the drawing board.

For days, I walked around, deep in thought; or scoured as many newspapers and magazines as I could. What was going on in the world, what was the buzz? I didn't realise it, but instinctively I was doing market research and examining demographics in the most elementary way. Almost accidentally, I had stumbled on a truism: whatever you sell, first identify your market. I think that was when it dawned on me that I was thinking too small. Students were everywhere - and student power was a newly invented phrase that had grabbed the media's attention. *Eureka!* I had the magic bullet.

Changing the name to *Student* instantly widened the field and gave us target sales not only of every sixth former - our original market - but of technical college and university students: hundreds and thousands of potential customers. It was a dazzling prospect and our excitement grew. Now we could offer huge circulation figures to potential advertisers, and also to contributors. We could

sell through mainstream magazine wholesalers and retailers, like WHSmith. Instead of saying that a thousand sixth formers might read our little magazine, we would sound convincing when we pitched the giddy premise of twenty, thirty, forty thousand to the money men. In the days before the Internet, it was difficult to find out how many students there were. I know how easy the Internet has made life and research for millions, and, despite my initial reservations, I have to admit that I do find myself with the need to tap into it more. However, my idea of market research is more basic: ask somebody who knows. I believe I picked up the telephone and called someone at the Ministry of Education and carefully wrote down the figure.

I thought that my business plan was scientific and sensible - an approach that might have surprised all my detractors, especially my maths and science teachers at school! I did my sums carefully, working out how much the paper and print bill would be. Then I worked out the income from sales and from selling ads. Contributors, I decided, would be glad to offer their services for nothing.

When I discussed my plans with Mum, as always, she took me seriously. 'What do you need to get started, Ricky?' she asked.

'Enough money for phone calls and letters,' was my prompt response.

Mum had always said you've got to invest a little to make money. She came up trumps by giving me a float of £4.00. In 1966 this was enough for 320 stamps or phone calls at thruppence (1.5p) each. Today, £4.00 will buy you less than 14 first-class stamps. Jonny's father put in an order for headed notepaper with STUDENT - THE MAGAZINE FOR BRITAIN'S YOUTH printed across the top, with the energising symbol of a rising sun.

My request for a telephone in my study at school was turned down by the headmaster, who was, I think, secretly amused. Nevertheless, although my 'office' desk was given

over entirely to the magazine, I had to accept having to use a callbox. My voice had broken, so I sounded older than I was, but the difficulty was I couldn't take calls; I was compensated to some extent, though, by discovering that I could make free ones by the simple expedient of telling the operator that the machine had swallowed my money and I'd been disconnected. Happily, operator-connected calls avoided that embarrassing little 'pip-pip-pip' when the coins went in the box, or when your call was up. A bonus was the operator sounded like a secretary: 'I have Mr Branson on the line for you.'

I wasn't the only person using a public callbox to start an empire - forty years ago, half the budding entrepreneurs in London did. You have to remember that this was the Swinging Sixties and things were changing so fast the old guard's head was spinning with the shock of it all. The Beatles, the Stones, Carnaby Street, King's Road - it was a young, vibrant world and commerce didn't want to get left behind. To my astonishment, they took me seriously.

My system was to write out our letters longhand, and then I sent them home to Mum. She got Elizabeth, a friend in the village, to type them out and send them back to me in batches for signing and posting. Jonny and I spent almost two years writing hundreds of letters trying to sell advertising space until I suddenly got the knack of how to sell the sizzle. I'd tell the advertising manager at Lloyds Bank that Barclays were taking the inside back page - did they want the prestigious back page itself before I offered it to the NatWest? I vied Coca-Cola against Pepsi. I honed my presentation skills, my sales pitch, and never gave a clue that I was a sixteen-year-old schoolboy standing in a cold callbox with a pocketful of pennies. Remarkably, it worked.

Making those phone calls, writing those letters and waiting for the replies was more fun than Latin lessons. I was wildly excited when eventually we got our first cheque