Richard Branson: How to be bold, brave and brilliant.

Peter Fisk interviews the Virgin entrepreneur – about his secrets and passions, hopes and fears, childhood and lifestyle, businesses and charities – and his dreams to come. Read more about Branson and his business approach in the new book “Gamechangers: Creating innovative strategies for business and brands.”

Richard Branson is an inspiration to many, the champion of customers and hero of many business people. The Virgin founder is a maverick entrepreneur and hippy billionaire, adventurer and philanthropist. He is always looking for new ways to do more for people, and to create a better world.

I recently had the opportunity to spend a day with him - to explore what drives him, what matters most to him, and what comes next in his amazing life.

Losing his virginity

He is one of the world’s most famous entrepreneurs, the loveable underdog with the shaggy beard and chunky jumpers, or the loathed self-publicist out to pick a fight with big business.

Yet he is one of the most successful business people of our generation, a fantastic guy who really cares about his people and his customers, and is now spending most of his time trying to make a positive difference to the world.
No one can argue with his survival instincts. From cash crisis in his businesses to ballooning in the jet stream at 180 mph without enough fuel, he talks about “setting myself huge and apparently unachievable tasks, and trying to rise above them”

Born in 1950 in Blackheath, London, Branson excelled at sports although his mild dyslexia meant that he struggled academically. His first business ideas, formed in the school library involved Christmas trees and budgerigars, and writing stories about his sexual conquests. They didn’t take off, but then in 1967 his idea for a magazine called Student did. He sold advertising space from the telephone box outside his school during break times, and was soon able to publish the first issue. He used to ask the telephone operator to connect him to potential clients, making it appear that she was his secretary. With the help of star interviews with the likes of Mick Jagger, using the operator trick, the magazine became a hit.

He left Stowe school at 16 with his headmaster predicting that he would either go to prison or become a millionaire. He did both.

He became an entrepreneur out of the need to earn money to keep Student afloat. He had long ago used the $7 “investment” from his mother, and from his London squat he hatched his next business plan. He started selling discount records by mail order through the magazine, a novel concept at the time. He named it Virgin Mail Order, “because it was run by a bunch of business virgins” and the brand was born. Orders streamed in, although at the age of 21 he was briefly arrested and jailed for exporting records without paying the correct taxes. He did a deal with customs and was released.

Virgin launched its first record store in 1971 in London’s Oxford Street. Then he built a recording studio in Oxfordshire and launched his own record label. Mike Oldfield (who made Branson his first million be recording Tubular Bells) and the Sex Pistols (who got him into jail again, briefly for bad language) were his first signings, followed y Phil Collins, Boy George and Janet Jackson.

When an American lawyer approached him with the idea of starting a new airline in 1984, Branson really got excited. Setting up Virgin Atlantic was his most risky and most lucrative achievement. “My proudest moment” he says “taking on the world’s airlines with one Jumbo, and not much idea of what to do next”.

Today there are around 450 Virgin companies, most of them being joint ventures, operating independently with their own boards. Collectively generating more than £10 billion revenues annually, “and the largest private company in Europe” he adds, proudly. His ventures range from airlines to trains, mobile phones to financial services, modelling agency to bridal wear, hotels to ski resorts, wine to cosmetics, and space travel.

The Virgin Group is more like a venture capital firm, using funds from existing companies to build new ones, making use of existing assets and resources, from the Virgin to seconding his best people across companies. He has seven close “right hand men” who sit on the boards of each Virgin business, and come together to share ideas, nurture the brand, and ensure that the Virgin group is not missing a trick.

Meanwhile the 50,000 Virgin employees love their leader, and indeed many get the chance to join him for a weekend on Neckar. He loves to spend time with his people, whether at work or at a party with them. Whilst he is relaxed, informal and always
looking for fun, he is always listening too. Listening for an idea, a suggestion, the next adventure.

Whilst he only spends a third of his personal time on his businesses these days, this is split between creative thinking – what to do next, why not to do things – and being the public face of his brand.

Whilst his hot air ballooning trips around the world have been well documented, another stunt had him rolling around in agony on wasteland near Mumbai airport, shot by a jealous lover called Rocky. Thankfully the leather-clad hero eventually climbed to his feet, revealing the mobile phone in his pocket that had just “saved his life”. In the latest ad for Virgin Media he plays a plastic surgeon, offering to enhance the assets of Spice Girl Mel B, whilst it's hard to forget that he promoted an Australian venture by pretending to be fellated in a Jacuzzi (just think “down under” and you'll get it).

Branson’s personal fortune is estimated at $4.6 billion according to Forbes, kept in a labyrinth of offshore family trusts. He is married to his second wife “the best decision he ever made” and has two children, Sam and Holly. The latter, having trained as a doctor, is now taking a much more active role in Virgin, a kind of understudy for a future role.

His life is now being made into a Miramax film, with Branson pleased that Hollywood’s leading men including Brad Pitt are being considered for the lead role.

**Branson live and unplugged**

Meeting Branson was an incredible experience. He’s a hero who I have watched, dismissed, admired, worked for, talked about, laughed at, but never failed to be impressed by. Bono, the U2 singer, said that there are two people who light up a room like nobody else – Bill Clinton and Richard Branson.

He walked in the door. We were alone. We were backstage before the London Business Forum. My task was to spend the next few hours interviewing him in front of 2500 people. He’d heard about my new book, and wanted to see it. Next he was asking if he could take a copy and if I could sign it for him. I thought this was supposed to work the other way.

He’s an incredibly relaxed, interested and nice guy. He wanted to know what I thought of Virgin sponsoring the London Marathon (fantastic) and of fellow entrepreneur, Alan Sugar (not so fantastic). He’s an incredibly good listener. He brought along his fat her too, well into his nineties. This was a special day for Richard because his Dad was there too.

It was nearly time to go on stage. He wished me luck, and gave me a hug. I thought I was supposed to be looking after him. Mike Oldfield played his Tubular Bells and we were on stage.
Fisk: **What’s a typical week for you, what do you actually do?**

Branson: I’m very lucky to have a full and fascinating life. Last night I ended up at four different parties. I don’t often get jaded, which is fortunate. Every day is full on. Even on a Friday night, like tonight, when others are taking it easy, I’m off to Kenya to celebrate a peace accord. Every day is very diverse, always different and incredibly interesting.

Today, for example, we launched our sponsorship of the London Marathon which is already phenomenally successful. There is no event in the world that raises as much money for charities, with around 50000 people running it, and five times as many people watching it. We want to build on David Bedford’s success, making more of the money raising and fun aspects – maybe even throwing the world’s biggest party afterwards, if people are still up for it after 26 miles.

I have one wonderful girl who looks after me. However I look after my own diary, which I find much more efficient, and helps me to make the most of every moment of my time. I try to keep a balance too in my personal life. Keeping fit is incredibly important. I love swimming and playing tennis.

Fisk: **Tell us about your childhood, and what influenced you?**

Branson: Whilst I loved sport and was very good at it, most academic things at school passed me by. My teachers believed I was dyslexic although I was never tested for it.

One implication was that, right up until the age of 50 whilst running the largest private company in Europe, I still couldn’t grasp the difference between gross and net profit. It made board meetings quite bizarre. Eventually one of my directors drew me a picture – he drew an ocean showing a net with fish in it which we could take home, explaining that everything else, all the rest of the turnover, goes elsewhere.
At 15 I started my Student magazine because I wanted to show that kids could learn in different ways, to campaign against the Vietnam war at the time, and to show people what I could do. In my first editorial, I wrote about how I wanted to change the world.

Fisk: **Music, airlines and mobiles … what are you most proud of?**

Branson: Building Virgin Atlantic against all the odds. Somebody once said that the easiest way to become a millionaire is to start off as a billionaire and go into the airline business.

The whole idea started when I was trying to get from the Virgin Islands to Puerto Rico one day, and American Airlines canceled their flight, and bumped me. So I went around the back and managed to charter a plane, returning with a blackboard saying ‘Virgin Airways, $39 one way to Puerto Rico’ which I held it up to the stranded passengers, and filled up the plane.

When I got home, I rang up Boeing and said that I’m Richard Branson from Virgin, the company that brought you the sex pistols and rolling stones. They had no idea who I was, but didn’t put the phone down, saying that as long as we don’t live up to our name, and go all the way, they’d send over a sales rep. A few months later we had a good quality, second hand 747. Because I’d already learnt to manage the downside, I managed to negotiate an option to hand the plane back after 12 months if we needed. I recognised that we could lose a lot of money on the venture, but not enough to bring the music business down. We didn’t need to hand it back and instead order a second.

The airline epitomises Virgin – it’s fun, great quality, you can see the people who work for it smile and have a good time. It’s all about the details. Trying to get every little detail right, and then constantly making them even better for customers. We’ve tried to use that example on anything else that we’ve done since.

Fisk: **And what’s your greatest disappointment?**

Branson: I’ve had such good fortune in my life that I try not to dwell on the things that have gone wrong.

Having said that, I felt passionately that the lottery [the UK’s national lottery, where he lost out to Camelot, who split its profits between shareholders and good causes] should be run in a different way – it’s a monopoly, a license to print money, and you can’t lose money running it. For that reason I don’t think a private company should be allowed to run it, and instead I wanted to run it in a way where all profits go to good causes. So it’s a pity that didn’t happen

Some things just don’t work out, but I don’t dwell on them. We probably lost the most money on Virgin Cola, although it’s still number one in Bangladesh.
Fisk: **So what is Virgin-ness?**

Branson: Every company is different. But people in every business are proud of what they've created. It’s always a lot of fun. And as a switch board operator you should be appreciated as much as a director. Oh, and there should be lots of parties too. Up until a few years ago I used to invite every employee and their family to my country home. Last time 70,000 people turned up with their partners and kids, pitched their tents in the garden, listened to the live bands, and we had a fantastic time.

Fisk: **What are the limits to stretching your brand?**

Branson: When we went from records to airlines I remember Lord King [the CEO of British Airways at the time] caustically and amusingly said that I was too old to rock n roll, too young to fly and will fail within a year. Of course we didn't and he soon retired. Unlike most brands, where Nike is about shoes, or Coke is about drinks, Virgin is more of a way of life brand. That’s because of how I am. I like giving new things ago. I like seeing things from a customer point of view.

Fisk: **How do retain the “challenger” mindset?**

Branson: It's all about creating small units. Although we are in lots of sectors, we’re not dominant in any. In mobile phones, we set up lots of companies, always smaller than Vodafone. Likewise in airlines, we’ve set up lots of small airlines, never the biggest in their local markets. We’re still the David rather than Goliath, although I’m sure some of our people would like to be Goliaths.

Fisk: **Which is your favourite Virgin business?**
Branson: I would have said some years ago that Virgin Atlantic was my favourite. It was a bit like having a child that was being bullied at school by the bigger airlines. However it’s now a beautiful 21 year old and can look after itself, so I enjoy looking after some of the smaller ventures.

Fisk: What’s your dream for Virgin?

Branson: There are still many areas around the world that I’d still like to challenge. The social issues are a fantastic motivator for people who work for Virgin, and I suspect they’re much prouder working for us because of them, even if they are not directly related to their business or making money.

Space travel is absolutely, unbelievably exciting. For a British company to be preparing to be the first to take fare-paying customers into space is phenomenal. We registered the name Virgin Galactic in 1991 and then spent a decade looking for potential engineers to build a reusable spaceship. We explored mad, zany ideas, and then found Burt Rutan who’s the absolute genius in this area. He’d come up with the idea of turning the spaceship into a massive shuttle cock, to slow the vehicle on its dangerous re-entry phase. We got involved in SpaceShipOne, and will soon be launching the second generation of spacecraft. The whole project is almost carbon neutral. Each space flight will generate fewer emissions than a flight to New York, whereas NASA use the power of New York City to spend up the Space Shuttle.

I can’t believe it, and I’m incredibly excited that in a couple of years from now, I will be taking my parents and children on our first flight into space.

Fisk: You have 450 companies, how do you manage them?

Branson: It’s important to think about what business really is. People think it’s about balance sheets, profit and loss. But really it’s about creating things - having a vision, creating something extremely special, then getting all the little details right – something that you can be really proud of, and others can be too. The actual business and its financial aspects are something to mop up at the end. If you’ve created something really special then people will come to it, pay for it, and that gives you the money to pay salaries, and invest in creating an even better business.

If you just call in the accountants, you’ll get one company who predict you’ll make lots of money, and another who say its a ghastly idea. Basically they have no idea. Business cases for new ventures are really not worth the paper they’re written on. It’s up to you and your team to create something really special, that people will really want. Don’t let the accounts in until afterwards.

Fisk: How much power or influence do you have?

Branson: I was brought up by my parents, lavished with love, always looking for the best in what we did. They were eager to praise us, and were rarely critical. That’s even more important as a business leader. It’s about looking for the good things, people don’t need to be told when they’ve slipped up, they already know it.

The moment you have more than one company, you need to learn the art of delegation. When I set up a new business, I spend a couple of months immersing myself in that business, so that I can make a contribution and have useful discussions with the new leaders. But then it’s about leaving them to it, and helping if and when they need it.
Fisk: What’s most difficult to manage – rock stars, airlines and trains?

Branson: Managing rock stars was a lot of fun, but hard work managing them and their drugs which tended to go along with them.

Fisk: How do you motivate people?

Branson: There’s no point being in business unless you want to make a real difference. So if the people you work for feel passionate about what they do, then that’s half the battle. But we also believe that a company should use some of its profits to make a wider difference in the world. If you can get all those things right, it creates a great place to work.

Fisk: Is it harder to be passionate in a big business?

Branson: Back in the days of Virgin records, there were 20 of us in a run-down mews house in Notting Hill Gate. When we got to 100 people I called in the deputy managing director, the deputy marketing and sales directors, and so, and told them they were now going to be the bosses of their own company. We split the company in two. And then as they grew, we did it again and again. We eventually had 10 different record companies all working independently and even competing against each other for the best artists and for sales.

With 450 companies in the Virgin group, we’ve tried to keep that philosophy going. Each of our businesses has to stand on its own feet. The people who run those companies have incentives based on their own business results. Over time Virgin has created around 200 millionaires. If they make mistakes, then it doesn’t have too much impact.

Fisk: What do you look for in a new business idea?

Branson: First I want to be excited by the idea. I want it to hit me between the eyes, to know that there is a crying out need for it, that it wasn’t been done by others, and that we could do it better. Perhaps the Virgin brand could bring something to it, and we could have a lot of fun.

Fisk: How do compare risk and rewards of new ventures?

Branson: Personally I look at things more in terms of what we should be doing - if there is a need for something to be done because it really matters to people or the world, then ultimately you will find a way to finance it. Do things for the right reasons. If you start a record company, sign the bands you really like - do things you’re passionate about first - and then you’ll be more committed to making it work.

Fisk: How do you manage for a downturn?

Branson: If you’re a company in a position to carry on expanding, then you should continue, because otherwise a downturn becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you can afford it there are opportunities to be had at such times. Whilst many of the US carriers are crumbling, we’ve just set up Virgin America which is thriving, and customers are flocking to it. For a smaller company, cash is king, so you need to be careful in a downturn.
Fisk: **You must be in demand, how do you allocate your time?**

Branson: I spend around 70% of my time on social issues and 30% on the businesses. I really want to make the most of my position to make a difference to the broader world.

Of the time focused on business, then 25% is on new projects, 25% is on helping to build the brand around the world, taking the business forward into places like India and China, 25% is firefighting when things go wrong, and 25% is being brought in to promote things or swing a deal.

From the early days I’ve worked from home, from my houseboat at first, in my hammock or a comfy chair. Now I tend to work more from my Caribbean home. I can get up early, go for a swim, have some breakfast by the shore, and by 8 am I’m ready to dictate some emails.

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Fisk: **What’s your secret, what are you really good at?**

Branson: I love people. I love listening to people, being with people, and achieving things with people.

Fisk: **If I you had been born 40 years later, how would your life be different?**

Branson: I would hopefully have learnt how to use the Internet. Most of the 80 and 90s generated many great ideas, mainly from young people who just loved what they were doing. My good friends Larry Page and Sergey Brin, the guys from Google, say that people trying to get into their kind of business in their late twenties are too old. But it's still about having a passion, a great idea, wanting to create things.
Fisk: **What are you doing about climate change?**

Branson: 4 years ago, Al Gore came to visit my home just before *An Inconvenient Truth* came out. He wanted my help in getting business people to sit up and care, and to do more about it. A few months later whilst sitting in the bath, I realised that we run one of the dirtiest industries in the world, and so thought let's switch the profits from these businesses into tackling those environmental issues. I talked it through with people like James Lovelock, Stephen Hawking and others and became convinced that we had a catastrophe in the making unless we did something about it now.

We brought a team of scientists together to start studying green energy. We explored crop-based ethanol fuels but quickly recognised that wasn't the best way because it eats into the food supply, so switched to other methods such as enzymes and algae as potential fuel sources. We still believe that sugar-based fuels have potential – there are tons of sugar in the world that isn't good for you. Solar and wind power are also important, and we're exploring more efficient ways to harness this energy. We experimented by flying a 747 at 35,000 feet on coconut oil, and now need to find a way of manufacturing sufficient amounts in a carbon neutral way.

Fisk: **Who are The Elders and what do they do?**

Branson: Prior to the Iraq war we were trying to stop Britain and America for invading the country, and instead finding a better way of resolving the situation. I asked Nelson Mandela to go and see [former Iraqi dictator] Saddam Hussein, maybe finding a way in which he could leave Iraq for a quiet life in Libya. Mandela agreed to go, if Kofi Annan went too. Unfortunately on the day we planned to go the bombing started.

Peter Gabriel, one of our rock stars, had a similar idea, so we asked Mandela if he would lead a team of 12 “elders” from around the world, people who had great wisdom and integrity, and could make a difference to global issues. He chose a team that largely represented the diverse world, people like Archbishop Tutu and President Carter, and they now go round the world trying to resolve issues that are causing tension, conflict and disaster. They work tirelessly, behind the scenes, trying to find solutions to conflicts in places like Darfur, Burma, and Zimbabwe.

We have also set up a global environmental war room, to challenge carbon, and enemy that threatens the world in a bigger way than the first and second world wars combined. There are lots of ideas, but no co-ordinated effort. The war room gives space to these ideas, to bring the best minds together, and experiment on more significant potential solutions.

Fisk: **If you can have one wish what would it be?**

Branson: I think it would be to get rid of all conflict in the world. With conflict you can't have education and health, and the whole of society breaks down. Some countries are perhaps a bit too quick to send in their armies, which leads to more problems than existed before.

Fisk: **Who do you admire most?**

Branson: Of the other brands in the world that I really respect, then Apple would be number one. Steve Jobs was thrown out of Apple, and then they began to realise what a
terrible mistake they'd made. He is very different from me, very hands on in every aspect of the business, overseeing every ad campaign around the world, and zealously protecting the Apple brand. I have enormous respect for him.

My heroes, however, are outside the business world. I've had the privilege of knowing Nelson Mandela ever since he came out of prison, and we've worked together on many projects. He and Archbishop Desmond Tutu would be my heroes.

Fisk: **What’s the best decision you ever made?**

Branson: Walking into the Manor recording studio kitchen one day and seeing this beautiful women and that was thirty two years ago.

Fisk: **How do you keep in touch with the real world?**

Branson: I'm lucky that I love people. I enjoy listening to people and learning from them. I believe that a good leader learns more by listening than by talking.

Because of the many social initiatives, I’m much more tuned into what’s going on than ever before – I’m interested in what's happening in China, Darfur, Sudan, and Zimbabwe at the moment.

I'm also always listening to customers. On a Virgin Atlantic plane I take time to go back and talk to passengers, listening often for little things, perhaps a certain drink is not available, or the cabin crew’s shoes are a bit tight. I have a note book with me, and scribbling little notes.

Fisk: **Are you a technology guy?**

Branson: I can read my emails. But I struggle beyond that, and have a great team of assistants to help me. I have actually started doing a computer course, although the biggest thing I’ve learnt so far is how to delete things. I once spent a 12 hour flight doing mails for the whole flight, and switched off the laptop to find that I’d lost everything, so I’ve never trusted things ever since.

I do have a mobile phone, well I have lots of them because I own a mobile phone company. But I can never find it, so I’m always boring other people’s phones [at this point, his travel organiser calls him. He fumbles around to find the phone, and then introduces her to 2500 people].

10 years ago I was at Bill Gates’ house, with around 30 other business leaders, people like Phil Knight of Nike and Steve Jobs from Apple. Midway through the evening Bill asked if anyone in the room did not use the internet. I started to raise my hand, but my wife quickly pushed it back down.

Later Bill asked each of us to talk for 10 minutes about how technology had changed our lives. He’s a great believer in constantly testing himself and others, so he handed out pieces of paper so that we could mark each other with scores out of ten. I was terrified, and spent more time trying to bribe Jobs and the others to give me a 10 if I gave them the same, rather than thinking of something profound to say.

Fisk: **How do you spend your personal time?**
Branson: I love spending time with people. I have friends that go back years and we are very lucky that we have our island to go there with families and pull up the drawbridge.

I love keeping fit, and think that’s very important - at the moment I’m swimming two hours every day, one hour in the morning, and one in the evening. I love parties, and going to the V Festival and other music festivals around the world.

I don’t go shopping. I don’t buy my own clothes. I have a wonderful lady who sorts out my food and clothes, and takes the weight off my shoulders. Perhaps you can tell I don’t actually pay that much attention to what I wear. A pair of jeans and shirt is good enough for me”

Fisk: **Who would be your ultimate dinner date?**

Branson: Well, let's think. Natalie Imbruglia, definitely ... and maybe Kate Moss ... and my wife too.

Fisk: **What keeps you going?**

Branson: I was never interested in the money aspects of business. I was always interested in learning. I never went to university, so see life as one long learning process. I love creating things, challenging myself and others around me. And I don’t want to waste this fantastic position I find myself in. I think I can continue to achieve things. And when you think about the alternative, of sitting on a beach all day, probably drinking too much, then I would get boring quite quickly. Life’s too precious to waste.

The audience had been enthralled and entertained, and now stood and cheered. He really did light up the room. We walked off stage. He was buzzing. “Great gig” he said, “some unusual questions too”. We hugged once more, he signed some of his own books this time, and he was off to catch his flight to Kenya.

**Screw it and do it**

This is a normal guy, slightly shy and incredibly laid back, somebody who really is no different from you and me. He wants to have fun, he wants to succeed, he has a hunger to learn and do better. This is a guy who really can make his dreams come true.

He also recognises that he’s not perfect, that there are many things he can’t do as well as others, and openly admits his fears and frustrations. What is remarkable is that he has done more than most of us could even dream of, overcoming many obstacles in the most spectacular ways.

At a time in life, when most of us would be thinking of taking it easy, he still wants to achieve more, and to change the world.

Virgin, and its 450 companies, loves to be the “customer champion”, always looking for ways to challenge the establishment, market conventions and structures that they feel are not in the interest of customers, and to find a better way to do business, and do good.

The values of Virgin are not just good words, but form the enduring principles for doing business. They are simple and fundamental. As Branson said “I always try to simplify things so that I understand them myself. When we first went into financial services, a guy
came and talked to me about “bid offer spread”. I had no idea what he was talking about, and I’m sure neither do most other people”.

Virgin builds each of its business, and delivers its services based on these 5 core values: fun, value for money, quality, innovation, competitive challenge and brilliant customer service. The ways of delivering these values range from the airline’s Limo Bikes to get you to the airport faster, to its “BA don’t give a shiatsu” ads poking fun at rival British Airways.

To conclude, and demonstrate the Branson streak of fun and mischief that runs through every part of the business, here are some of Virgin’s more off-beat, quirky but still inspirational moments:

- **An ear for talent.** In 2003, an unknown singer-songwriter approached the store manager at Virgin Megastores, Milton Keynes to ask him if we’d stock his new single, which he’d written and recorded himself. The manager liked what he heard and agreed to stock the single - that went on to make it into the Top 40!

- **Bathtime fun.** The worst thing about business travel can be being away from home. We hit on the idea of putting a rubber duck in the bathrooms of Virgin-owned hotels, as a small gesture to help a harried businessman feel more at home. Who wouldn’t love a rubber ducky?

- **Another cool idea.** What's better than watching a really great movie? Watching a really great movie with an ice cream! That's what we thought too, which is why Virgin Atlantic dishes out choc-ices to passengers while they're watching movies onboard.

- **Press play.** So you’ve heard the single on the radio and are thinking of buying the album. But what if you hate all the other tracks? Virgin Megastores wondered the same thing, so they were the first major music retailers to put Listening Posts in their stores.

- **In a nutshell.** Richard says that the best way to test if your product is clear enough is the ‘pub sentence rule’: if you’re waiting at the bar to be served and a punter asks, “What's the point of Virgin X?” he should be able to answer in a brief sentence. Simple!

- **Miracle fish.** A little boy called Eli was travelling with Virgin Atlantic from Johannesburg to London. Just before take-off excitedly told the crew "Look, I've got my goldfish in this jar, he's never flown before!" They had to then break the news to Eli that actually fish aren’t allowed to fly! He was devastated. However on arrival, Richard sent him a letter and a new goldfish, whilst the original fish is now best friends with the Jo’burg airport staff.

- **Sing song.** Once at Virgin Money, one of our customers really didn't want to be put on hold, so a call centre operator personally sang "New York, New York" to them while they waited to find out some information.

- **Mischief makers.** Kids will be kids. And sitting still is a pretty big ask when you’re full of beans and there are train carriages to run amok in. Wouldn't it be great if there was something fun for them to do, to keep them out of mischief? Cue the
Virgin Trains kid’s activity packs, chockfull of fun and games, putting smiles on the faces of kids and parents alike!

- **Viscious and rotten.** Virgin Records leapt in where others feared to tread when they signed the Sex Pistols in 1977, and controversy was never far away. On Silver Jubilee Day 1977, Johnny Rotten and the band spat out their venomous version of ‘God Save the Queen’ on a Thames cruiser opposite the House of Commons. Police boarded the boat and arrested the band’s manager, Malcolm McLaren. That week, Virgin sold more copies of the now-banned Pistols single than the ‘official’ number one by Rod Stewart.

- **Toilet paper.** "If you’re embarking around the world in a hot-air balloon, don’t forget the toilet paper. Once, we had to wait for incoming faxes!” advises the intrepid leader.

Things don’t always go as planned, and indeed Branson has had his ups and downs like everyone. One of those ballooning ventures almost ended in death, with his co-pilot bailing out and the balloon screaming towards a crash landing in the water. Branson had little idea what to do, let alone time to look for some fax paper. Thankfully he was saved by a change of wind direction, and lived to tell his tale.

Branson is inspirational and exceptional. He provides a role model to every business person for daring to do the extraordinary. He never stops championing the cause of customers, and trying to make life better for them. And let’s hope he can work his magic in saving the world too.

Just before that glimpse of death in his balloon back in 1997, he was sitting in Morocco waiting for the final launch sequence. In his autobiography “Losing My Virginity” he shares the letter which he wrote at that moment to his children, in case he didn’t return.

“Dear Holly and Sam.

Life can seem rather unreal at times. Alive and well and loving one day. No longer there the next. As you both know I always had an urge to live life to its full. That meant I was lucky enough to live the life of many people during my 46 years. I loved every minute of it and I especially loved every second of my time with both of you and Mum.

I know that many people thought us foolish for embarking on this latest adventure. I was convinced they were wrong. I felt that everything we had learned from our Atlantic and Pacific adventures would mean that we’d have a safe flight. I thought that the risks were acceptable. Obviously I’ve been proved wrong.

However, I regret nothing about my life except not being with Joan to finally help you grow up. By the ages of 12 and 15 your characters have already developed. We’re both so proud of you. Joan and I couldn’t have had two more delightful kids. You are both kind, considerate, full of life (even witty!). What more could we both want.

Be strong. I know it won’t be easy. But we’ve had a wonderful life together and you’ll never forget all the good times we’ve had. Live life to its full yourselves. Enjoy every minute of it. Love and look after Mum as if she’s both of us.

I love you. Dad”
Peter Fisk is a global thought leader in strategy, innovation and marketing. Starting his career as a nuclear physicist, he went on to work for and with many of the world’s leading brands – from Concorde to Coca Cola, Red Bull and Santander, Virgin and Vodafone. He is founder and CEO of GeniusWorks, the London-based strategy and innovation consulting firm, and visiting professor at IE Business School in Madrid. He has authored 7 books including “Marketing Genius” which has been translated into 35 languages, and and is included in the Thinkers 50 Guru Radar of the best business thinkers. He is an inspiring keynote speaker, highly experienced facilitator and practical coach. Find out more at www.theGeniusWorks.com

His new book “Gamechangers: Creating Innovative Strategies for Business and Brands” explores the world’s 100 most disruptive innovators, and then interprets 10 paradigms for success in today’s business world. From enlightened vision to finding new markets, bolder brands and innovative business models, new customer agendas and enabling experiences, realtime marketing and social movements, inspiring leadership to deliver more profitable growth. It includes 16 practical one page canvases, workshops and executive programs. Explore more about the book at www.Gamechangers.pro