



IN THIS SUMMARY

Secret 1: Richard the Lionheart	2
Secret 5: Do Right by Your Brand	4
Branson the Super-Hero	5
Keep it Simple	7

10 SECRETS OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST BRAND BUILDER

Flamboyant entrepreneur Richard Branson has become a household name. Along with his brand, Virgin, he is an instantly recognisable symbol of our times.

The Virgin brand encompasses an eclectic mix – everything from airlines to music, bridal wear, mobile phones and pension plans. Virgin is the only brand in the world that transcends such a vast array of products and services. And instead of diluting the brand, this incredible diversification seems to have strengthened it. Virgin has created a name for itself as the innovative, inexpensive, cool alternative to the big players.

More than just a successful businessman, Richard Branson is one of a new breed of entrepreneurs. With his irreverent attitude, penchant for publicity-grabbing stunts and celebrity status, he stands out like a corporate rock star in a sea of faceless 'suits'.

Sure, Branson has had his fair share of failures. His attempts may not always succeed, but they always win him publicity and popularity.

And now you can learn how he does it.

You are about to learn how to stretch a brand from condoms to credit cards. How to use the media to generate free advertising better than anything money can buy. You will see how Branson has generated loyalty in his employees that is almost unmatched in the modern business world.

Richard Branson's secrets will show you what it takes to create one of the most powerful brands in the world. How to structure your businesses so you don't lose the personal touch. How to make work an exciting adventure – for you and your staff. And how to take on the corporate Goliaths and win.

Read on to discover the secrets to building a world-beating brand – the Richard Branson way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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SECRET 1: RICHARD THE LIONHEART

While other empire-builders get involved in corporate dogfights, Richard Branson approaches business challenges as a crusade. He prides himself in taking on big companies to offer customers better value for money. In many of the markets Virgin has entered, customers already had a sense that they weren't being treated fairly. Virgin's better value offerings placed it firmly on the customers' side.

Branson has built his reputation on playing a scruffy David to the corporate Goliaths of the business world. While some entrepreneurs might look at the power of the market leaders and think better of the challenge, Branson delights in taking on the big players and winning.

Shortly after the launch of Virgin Atlantic, Branson dressed up as a pirate and draped the Virgin logo over the Concorde. It was a fantastic photo opportunity and the following day, pictures of the Virgin pirates were splashed across the major newspapers. Lord King, Branson's long-time rival and the chairman of British Airways, was not amused.

Asked how a person becomes a millionaire, Richard Branson replied: "Start off as a billionaire, then open an airline."

The battle between Lord King and Branson had just begun. Branson was certain that British Airways had used a variety of techniques, some of dubious legality, to try to undermine the success of Virgin Atlantic. The competition laws in Europe were not strong enough to fight British Airways in the courts, but Branson was not prepared to let BA get away with attempts to destroy his airline.

A documentary maker decided to investigate Branson's claims of British Airways' dirty tricks. The resulting documentary, "Violating Virgin" incensed British Airways. BA sent a letter to the filmmaker, and published another letter in its in-house corporate newsletter, accusing Branson of making false allegations to generate publicity.

Already enraged, and bristling from the personal attack on him and his airline, Branson came out fighting. He sued British Airways for libel. Outmanoeuvred by Branson's legal team, British Airways settled the action in 1993 for £610,000 plus an estimated £4.5 million in legal costs. In a move that was vintage Branson, he shared the £610,000 settlement equally among all Virgin employees.

Each employee received a "BA Bonus" of exactly £166. The bonus sent a powerful message to Virgin staff that together, they had won a great victory.

PICK ON SOMEONE BIGGER THAN YOU

• **Make Business a Crusade**

Everything Branson does is draped in a crusader's cloak. This gives Virgin moral authority and wins the hearts and minds of the public.

• **Hoist a Pirate Flag**

Some people see Branson as more of a buccaneer than a crusader. His irreverent approach to authority is combined with a perennial sense of fun. He delights in being a thorn in the side of big business.

• **Everyone Likes the Underdog**

It's hard to think ill of a man who takes on companies that are – or appear to be – bigger than his.

• **Choose Your Battles Carefully**

Branson may appear to take on seemingly impossible business enterprises just because "they are there". But in reality he has carefully chosen to respond to an emerging business opportunity.

• **Hit 'em Where it Hurts**

Branson has often used guerrilla tactics to vanquish a larger rival. This is how he vanquished British Airways. Using the element of surprise Virgin effectively ambushed BA – at the ticket office and in the courts.

SECRET 2: DO THE HIPPIE HIPPIE SHAKE

Branson's informal style and nonconformist attitude have earned him the title of "hippie capitalist". But in Branson's case, the hippie tag is misleading. His affinity with flower-power and the hippie movement of the sixties simply reflects his knack for being in tune with the feeling of the times.

This is one of Branson's greatest business attributes. Being part of whatever is hip and trendy allows him to project the Virgin brand as a "cool" alternative to whatever the 'suits' are offering.

"I can't walk past a fat and complacent business sector without wanting to shake it up a bit."

Unlike other moguls, Branson is not motivated by money. His appetite for material things is modest by billionaire standards. His jeans and scruffy jumpers have become a trademark that sets him apart from the stuffed-shirt British corporate establishment. Money is a measure of his success, but for him the excitement is in the challenge.

And he believes in having fun. So much so, that Virgin staff are often paid a little less than market rates – yet they

where the key people are on the ground – keeps the greatest possible number of Virgin staff in direct contact with the marketplace.

While most of the corporate world seems obsessed with the size of one another's organisations, Branson prefers to keep it small. The Virgin group retains its unique energy and speed because it maximises the entrepreneurial spirit of its staff whilst minimising the bureaucracy of its systems.

“Every time a business gets too big, we start a new one. Keeping things small means keeping things personal; keeping things personal means keeping the people that really matter.”

Branson, the human dynamo at the centre of the Virgin phenomenon, is constantly sparking off new ideas. They may take off – or they may fall by the wayside. Branson and his development team are constantly reviewing proposals – about 50 a week. At any time they will have about four new projects under review. And once a project gets the nod, it can be off the ground in a matter of months.

Branson's enthusiasm for new ventures often gets the better of him. And for promotional clout, you can't go past a Branson media PR event. Branson says that he usually immerses himself in a new venture for the first three months. Then he backs off and keeps in touch every six months or so.

The exception is Virgin Atlantic Airways, to which Branson devotes the lion's share of his attention. Since the sale of Virgin Music to EMI in 1993, the airline has been “the jewel in the crown” of the Virgin group.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Part of Branson's charm is his belief in keeping things simple. Despite the complexity of the Virgin group – a constantly evolving web of start-ups, joint ventures and partnerships – Branson's personal life epitomises his down-to-earth philosophy.

He can't type or use a computer. He doesn't know how to turn on a ThinkPad. He thinks Lotus is a sports car. He scribbles ideas on an A4 pad, in his diary or on his hand. Despite his enormous personal wealth, he still dresses in old scuffed shoes and is notorious for wearing scruffy-looking woollen jumpers.

He couldn't be more different from the stuffed shirt, Armani-suit wearing faceless businessmen we usually associate with corporate success on a massive scale.

OPEN TO SUGGESTION

The Virgin culture is open to new ideas from any quarter. Branson has made it his business to listen. He receives 30 to 40 letters each day from Virgin staff with their suggestions. He tries to respond to their letters first. And

he has made it known that Virgin will look at proposals from potential business partners.

Beneath the surface of the chaotic evolving organism that is the Virgin group, can be seen an entrepreneurial blueprint. Each company stands on its own – although the premises may be less than glamorous – and has its own management team. Overheads are kept low and more importantly, a family atmosphere is created among the staff.

SIZE-WISE

• *Small is Beautiful*

In typically laid-back style, Virgin doesn't subscribe to the typical hierarchical company structure. Instead, it is a loose cluster of small but associated businesses.

• *Grow Your Own*

Branson doesn't buy, he builds. This sets him apart as a special kind of business leader. Instead of a business empire created by gobbling up smaller enterprises, Branson's astonishing empire is homegrown.

• *Keep it Simple*

Branson's life is uncluttered and he doesn't flaunt the trappings of wealth. He is living proof that the good life is the simple life – even if you are a billionaire!

• *Break it Down into Bite-Sized Chunks*

Each Virgin business is a stand-alone venture. This brings out the entrepreneurial streak in the staff, while balancing the risk of losses in one part of the business affecting the rest of the empire.

• *To HQ or not to HQ*

Branson has long spurned the idea of traditional corporate headquarters. He is content to run his multi-billion dollar empire from a houseboat or a local pub.

• *Ensure the Sum of the Parts is Greater Than the Whole*

Branson has a great talent for bringing out the best in people. His enthusiasm infects the entire organisation with a passion to have fun and succeed. He gives people the freedom to shine and they reward his confidence with energy and loyalty almost unmatched in the modern business world.

• *Little Things Matter*

Branson knows that small things matter. This is a feature of all Virgin products and services. It is also reflected in Branson's style of treating everyone as an equal. Branson listens to his employees and makes a personal connection with his staff.

SECRET 10: NEVER LOSE THE COMMON TOUCH

The key to Richard Branson's success – and incredible

The answer is that Branson inspires people. He creates an exciting work culture that motivates people and makes them want to give their best. His adventurous spirit, and confidence that no mountain is too high, is contagious. The sense of fun, excitement and challenge keeps Virgin employees happy.

“I get the best people, I ask questions, and then I say “let’s have some fun””

In the early days, employees were compensated for low wages and dilapidated offices with regular wild parties and a carnival atmosphere. Even today, the line between work and play isn’t easy to draw at Virgin. And the Virgin sense of humour keeps employees smiling.

“Children and companies flourish under praise.”

Through his inspirational leadership, Branson gets amazing results from his staff. Virgin sales and profit levels are far above the industry standards. Branson wants and expects his people to do their best to achieve the goals he sets for them. And Virgin employees don’t disappoint him. After all – doing the impossible is part of the Virgin ethos.

And Branson reinforces this with his record-breaking feats in speedboats and hot-air balloons.

To Richard Branson, the Virgin experience has been a magical mystery tour. Branson himself bristles with fun and excitement. People can’t resist joining the Virgin adventure.

ALL WORK & NO PLAY....

- *Let Employees Run Free*

Branson surrounds himself with talented people and gives them the freedom to be creative. Time after time, they reward his faith with dazzling results.

- *Encourage Informality*

Stay on first name terms. To the average Virgin employee, Branson is simply ‘Richard’.

- *Enthusiasm is Contagious*

Branson’s inspirational style gets exceptional performance from his staff, with sales and profit levels far above industry benchmarks.

- *Business is an Adventure*

Part of Virgin’s appeal as an employer and a brand is the promise of adventure and fun.

SECRET 5: DO RIGHT BY YOUR BRAND

Some critics have argued that the wide reach of the Virgin brand threatens to dilute its strength. Branson disagrees. He believes that as long as the integrity of the brand is not compromised, there is nowhere that it cannot stretch.

Virgin has certainly become a thoroughly recognisable brand. A 1997 survey showed that 96% of British consumers had heard of Virgin and 96% could correctly name Richard Branson as its founder.

“In the early days, the actual Virgin name itself was perceived as slightly risqué. We weren’t even allowed to register it for three years with the Patent Office because they felt it was “rude”. But sometimes you have to take some risks in developing a brand.”

Rather than traditional product or service branding, Virgin relies on “reputational branding”. Instead of associating the Virgin brand with a particular product or service, consumers associate it with five key qualities: value for money, quality, reliability, innovation and a sense of fun and adventure. Even after thirty years, Virgin remains cool and trendy in a way that few other brands can boast.

BRAND IT LIKE BRANSON

- *A Good Brand Travels*

The all-embracing Virgin brand breaks all the rules against brand dilution. But Branson has created a completely new type of brand – one that seems able to transcend all barriers.

- *Brands Can Stretch Forever*

The most important aspect of the Virgin brand is its credibility across market segments. Existing Virgin products and services create credibility for new offerings.

- *Love, Honour & Cherish Your Brand*

Branson has acknowledged repeatedly that Virgin’s most vital asset is its reputation. Look after your brand and it will look after you.

- *Rules are for Breaking*

If you’ve got a great brand and can see an opportunity, don’t let a little thing like a lack of experience in a market stand in your way.

- *A Pinch of Salt Adds Flavour*

Whatever Virgin does, it does with style and a bit of fun. Virgin balances professionalism with a sense of humour.

SECRET 6: PLAYING UP TO THE PRESS

Richard Branson has turned himself into a walking, talking Virgin logo. Every time he appears on TV, in a newspaper or magazine, he promotes the Virgin brand. Branson is as recognisable as Ronald McDonald or Mickey Mouse.

This is a deliberate and very clever strategy. When one American advertising executive was asked to calculate the advertising value of Branson’s failed attempt to circumnavigate the globe in a hot-air balloon, he replied: “There aren’t enough zeros to do the math”.

Anita Roddick, Bill Gates and Ted Turner can't hold a candle to Branson when it comes to generating positive publicity. Public relations is Branson's special gift.

With the launch of Virgin Atlantic, Branson discovered a new trick. Major airlines spent literally millions of dollars on advertising. Branson realised that generating free media was the only way he could stay in the race – and so began his series of daredevil escapades.

Instead of spending millions on advertising, Branson has mastered the art of generating column inches for free. Instead of employing expensive PR firms to orchestrate contrived media events, Branson delivers something much more valuable – news.

To publicise the launch of his airline, he appeared at the press conference dressed like Biggles in a brown leather aviator helmet. The press loved it. They splashed Branson's image all over their newspapers. Virgin didn't even need to advertise its first flights.

Branson made the decision to challenge for the Blue Riband – the prize for the fastest Atlantic crossing – when he discovered he couldn't afford the rates to promote his airline on New York television.

ALL BUSINESS IS SHOW BUSINESS

He may not look it, but Richard Branson is a finely tuned PR machine. He is a walking, talking advertisement for Virgin. Here's how he has become the darling of the press:

- ***Understand What they Want – And Give it to Them***

Where other companies spend fortunes on advertising, Branson generates free press coverage. Instead of employing expensive PR firms to come up with contrived events, Branson has his own style. His daring stunts are far more eye-catching and often make the news in themselves.

- ***Think in Pictures***

Branson has a knack for creating great photo opportunities that have a true visual impact on the public.

- ***Know When to Duck***

Not only does Branson know how to steal the limelight when he wants it, he has an impressive ability to dodge the spotlight if necessary to avoid negative publicity.

BRANSON THE SUPER-HERO

Branson has a special knack for popping up at important moments in history. And of course Branson makes a concerted effort to make history through his world recordbreaking escapades.

Branson's attempts to cross the Atlantic and circumnavigate the globe have created headline-grabbing drama and generated enormous publicity for Virgin. With Branson

playing up to the media and flashing his trademark toothy grin, it is easy to forget that he is risking his life.

When the attempt to circumnavigate the globe in a hot-air balloon went horribly wrong, the craft was dropping at a rate of 2000 feet per minute. The lives of everyone on board hung in the balance. In true Hollywood fashion, a senior engineer had to climb out onto the balloon and release additional weight to avert disaster.

The attempt had cost £300 million and the balloon had travelled only 400 miles. As a world-record attempt it was a failure. In advertising terms, it was nothing short of a triumph.

Part of Branson's charm is his willingness to put himself on the line for his brand. Whether it means playing the fool, dressing up in a pirate costume, wearing a stewardess uniform, or risking his life in a hot-air balloon, Branson doesn't shy away from the spotlight. In fact, he knows just how to attract it.

Branson's exploits resonate with the message – "life is an adventure, life is fun" – which has come to embody the Virgin philosophy.

SECRET 7: DON'T LEAD SHEEP, HERD CATS

Richard Branson doesn't expect his people to follow blindly wherever he leads. Instead he creates a challenging, exciting environment, which brings out the best in people. He doesn't coerce – he inspires. Challenged and exhilarated by the Virgin philosophy, people are motivated to give their best.

Rather than letting Virgin companies expand indefinitely, when a company in the Virgin Group reaches a certain size, Richard will take the assistant managers aside and tell them that they are now in charge of a new company. The policy of promoting talent from within encourages Virgin employees to give their all in the hope that they will be given the opportunity to really shine.

Branson is a back-seat leader. He sees leadership as an art more akin to conducting an orchestra than controlling an army. One of Branson's greatest attributes is the ability to step aside and let people get on with it. With up to 200 companies in the Virgin group, it would be impossible to be a hands-on leader of every company.

"Virgin staff are not mere hired hands. They are not managerial pawns in some gigantic chess game. They are entrepreneurs in their own right."

So if he isn't spending his time on the day-to-day running of the business, what is he doing? He is enthusing people, creating the buzz that permeates and exemplifies the Virgin ethos. He is important as a figurehead for the Virgin brand – complete with attention-grabbing stunts, daredevil adventures and media appearances.

NEW AGE LEADERSHIP

Branson gets the best from individuals by creating a challenging environment.

- ***Be a Back Seat Leader***

One of the characteristics of the Branson leadership style is knowing when to stand aside and let people get on with the job.

- ***Act as a Catalyst***

Branson is the catalyst that transforms the potential of an idea into action.

- ***Surround Yourself with Talented People***

Branson excels at surrounding himself with talented people and creating an environment where they can flourish.

- ***Constantly Search the Horizon for New Opportunities***

By staying in touch with Virgin customers and employees, Branson gains valuable information. He then uses it to spy new business opportunities ripe for the Virgin touch.

But there is another aspect to the Branson leadership phenomenon. Richard Branson stands for something that makes people proud to work for his company and genuinely desire to do their best. It's hard to pin down exactly what those values are other than to say that he treats people with respect and listens to what they have to say. This in turn makes Virgin employees and the public in general respect Branson for what he represents.

SECRET 8: BUSINESS AT RECORD-BREAKING SPEED

When an opportunity presents itself, Branson has a unique ability to move at record-breaking speed to take advantage of it. He rightly disdains the 'suits' of the corporate world for the slowness of their reaction times. Management gurus are amazed at the speed at which his huge organisation is able to act. In the corporate jungle, Virgin's agility and swiftness sets it apart from the competition.

Virgin Atlantic Airways was airborne just five months after the idea was first floated. Virgin Direct, the financial services company, was also up and running after only five months. It would have taken any other company at least two years – assuming they could reach a decision to venture into such uncharted waters at all!

Branson relies on his business instincts and doesn't waste valuable time trying to convince a layer of bureaucratic middle managers that his latest brainwave is a good idea.

Virgin can often launch new products - and whole new companies – into the market with a speed that bewilders its unwieldy competitors. In the age of business at light speed, this can make all the difference between seizing an opportunity and missing out.

FASTER THAN A SPEEDING BULLET

- ***Avoid Analysis-Paralysis***

Branson doesn't spend a lot of time analysing, researching or investigating his decisions. He just jumps in – and the speed at which he expects his people to move can be breathtaking.

- ***Leap Before You Look***

Branson is not a big believer in market research. He believes in his instinctive feel for what customers want. Often he gets his ideas from conversations with his customers.

- ***Streamline Decision-Making***

Timing is crucial to Branson's success. He knows how to recognise and exploit decisive moments and seize opportunities that others miss.

- ***Get a Little Help from Your Friends***

Branson has a special knack for persuading others to get involved in his projects. With Virgin employees or joint venture partners, Branson's infectious enthusiasm energises others and gets them on board.

- ***Mistakes are Essential***

Mistakes are the only way to learn. Branson gets fired up by ideas and converts them into business opportunities at lightning speed. The downside for Virgin employees is their fearless leader's habit of changing horses in midstream!

Branson always drives a hard bargain, and especially with joint venture partners. When allowing others to use the Virgin name, Branson always oversees the use of the brand. He will only allow it to be used on products he and the company can be proud of.

With the world-wide recognition and popularity of the Virgin brand, companies often approach Branson to set up joint ventures. This allows the company to venture into new areas – often using the resources of willing partners who are keen to benefit from the kudos of the Virgin label.

Branson certainly has a brilliant sense of timing. He seems to have a knack for finding the decisive moment and exploiting it to the full. Whether in negotiations, planning new business ventures, or taking advantage of well-timed photo opportunities, Branson somehow always manages to be the man of the moment.

SECRET 9: SIZE DOES MATTER

Branson is a builder, not a buyer, of businesses. Where other moguls have taken over their industries by gobbling up the smaller players, the Virgin Empire has grown organically. Setting up companies is Branson's great skill. And the structure of the Virgin group – small companies

are happy to work for Virgin because they enjoy the buzz. Branson regularly hosts lavish parties for his employees, complete with bouncing castles, food, drinks and activities. Talking business is not allowed – the parties are strictly for fun.

SUCCESS THE LAID-BACK WAY

With his informal style and reputation for being a nonconformist, Richard Branson's management style offers the following lessons to those who aspire to make money and love, not war.

- ***Don't be a Bread-Head***

There's more to business than just money. Despite his wealth, Branson's appetite for luxury is surprisingly modest. Somehow, he persuades others that money isn't the most important thing.

- ***Dress Down Every Day – Not Just Fridays***

Branson's dislike of wearing a suit and tie is notorious. His informal dress sense stands out from the crowd – and he's always made it work to his advantage.

- ***Put People First***

Branson is a great believer in people power. He has built Virgin on the basis that people – employees and customers – come first.

- ***Mix Business with Pleasure***

From the start, Virgin businesses were built on a deliberate policy of mixing business with pleasure. "Work hard, play hard" has always been part of the Virgin philosophy.

- ***Don't Imitate, Innovate***

Branson has a mischievous desire to shake up the markets he enters – and the establishment in general. The sectors where Virgin has set up shop are never the same again. And by picking business areas that are in desperate need of innovation, usually because the dominant market players are not responding to the true needs of the consumer, Branson is able to gain rapid market share from his unimaginative competition.

SECRET 3: HAGGLE – EVERYTHING'S NEGOTIABLE

Richard Branson has turned the old adage 'Nice guys finish last' on its head. In spite of – or perhaps because of – his Mr Nice Guy image, Branson rarely comes out second best in business dealings. His cheeky, schoolboy charm disarms people. Branson has the audacity to ask for more than anyone else would dare – and the charisma to get away with it.

After thirty years, Branson remains the unchallenged leader of one of the world's best-known companies. He has poached the market share of the most aggressive

companies in the world and taken on the biggest players in highly competitive industries. With his family he still owns around 60% of the equity in the Virgin Group. The Virgin empire is now worth over £1 billion.

Branson is congenial, charming and unconventional. But he also has a street-trader's knack for negotiation, knowing just when to press the point and when to walk away. And he likes to haggle just for the fun of it.

STRIKE A BARGAIN

One of Branson's less celebrated talents is his razorsharp negotiating technique. His charisma and schoolboy charm belie a calculating dealmaker. The lessons from the Branson School of Negotiation are:

- ***Nice Guys Don't Have to Finish Last***

Branson's shrewd negotiating skills and persuasive tongue are enhanced by his easy charm. He lulls all but the most hardened business people into dropping their guard.

- ***Never Take No For An Answer***

Branson's cheek of the devil negotiating style has become a Virgin hallmark. By simply taking no, never and impossible out of his vocabulary a world of opportunity has opened up for him.

- ***Talk Softly and Carry a Big Stick***

For all his affable charm, some people say that Richard Branson isn't nearly as nice to do business with as you might expect. One thing is for sure, Branson didn't get where he is by being a pussycat.

- ***Get Good Professional Advice***

Branson's happy-go-lucky image masks a clever businessman who knows the value of good professional advice.

- ***Always Cover the Upside***

When it comes to a start-up, most entrepreneurs look at covering the downside. Branson makes deals that cover the upside too.

SECRET 4: MAKE WORK FUN

Branson believes that business should be fun. His own appetite for work and the success of his business ventures rest on this belief. Going to the office at Virgin isn't the drudgery we usually associate with our mundane working lives. Branson injects his personal sense of challenge, fun and excitement into every Virgin enterprise. All the industries Virgin has broken into have been mature,

conventional industries dominated by large players. So what is it that Branson knows about business that people who have been in these conventional industries for years have failed to understand?

popularity – is his ability to mix with people from all walks of life. It's easy enough to keep the common touch and listen to customers when you're first starting out – but to still be doing it thirty years later when you're the multi-millionaire chairman of a company worth billions of dollars is an inspiring achievement.

THE COMMON TOUCH

Richard Branson's ultimate gift is the common touch. It's the real secret to his enduring success and popularity.

- ***Listen to People***

It's the least practiced and possibly most valuable management skill of all.

- ***Don't Let Success Go To Your Head***

A sense of humour and a willingness to laugh at yourself goes a long way to making your employees and customers feel you're just like them.

- ***Use your Customers as Consultants***

Customers know what they need better than any expensive consulting firm. Branson knows that the little things matter - and he listens to find out what the most important things are.

- ***Treat Everyone as an Equal***

Branson would sooner be rude to the CEO of a multinational than to a check-in clerk. Branson seems to have his finger on the pulse of the nation.

- ***Be What People Want You to Be***

Part of Branson's appeal is that he represents different things to different people. He has dazzled the British business scene for more than twenty years in a way that no other entrepreneur ever has.

About once a week Richard takes a Virgin flight. He always talks to the other passengers. Of course he has been known to ham it up by dressing up in a stewardess' uniform and lipstick to serve drinks to customers and crew. But on other occasions he just chats to people, asking them what they think of the airline and how the service could be improved. He has the common sense to see that customers are the best consultants money can buy.

When he began Virgin Atlantic Airways, Branson had a policy of personally phoning 50 customers a month to ask about the service. This was in stark contrast to the attitude of other airline managers and chairmen who thought they were too important to talk to mere economy class customers. Branson's down-to-earth approach won him adulation.

The difference between Richard Branson and other millionaires, moguls and magnates is that he treats people decently and listens to what they have to say. This puts him head and shoulders above the competition.

Branson is something of an everyman figure. For all his monumental personal wealth, his posh accent and beautiful houses, ordinary people accept him as one of their own. Branson's popularity transcends national and class barriers. A survey in May 1993 showed that he was the person most young people would choose as a role model. He has been elevated to the status of a cult hero

Branson's sense of humour, passion for adventure and determination to have fun are hard to resist. He represents excitement, success, hard work and adventure. He radiates a zest for life and a natural exuberance personified by his Cheshire cat grin. Even if you can't figure out why, it's next to impossible not to like Richard Branson.

We see ourselves in Richard Branson. We see him doing the things we want to do. We feel he is one of us, he is on our side, and we in turn get behind his new schemes – however hare-brained - with an enthusiasm that almost matches his own. We want him to succeed – and he does.

And now you know how he does it.