

the press conference with RICHARD BRANSON

Sir Richard Branson is the tycoon behind the Virgin empire of trains, planes, mobiles and heaven knows what else. In fact, he's even on course to take the first tourists there — well, into space, at least — with Virgin Galactica. If Branson is a gifted businessman, then he is also a maestro of publicity. Now 58, his endless buffoonery has seen him grinning out at us from the tabloids and broadsheets alike for more than 30 years. If you believe those silly surveys that crop up, Sir Richard Branson is the person most of us would like to be. In true billionaire style, Branson calls me at my home office in London from his current home office — on Necker, his own paradise Caribbean island. That fact alone pretty much decides which box I will tick when the next questionnaire comes round.

So, Sir Richard, you're working out of Necker these days — must be awful?
Well, it's not such a bad place to work. I have been using Necker Island as my base because it is only two hours from America, which is where we have a lot of new businesses. Most of our businesses in the UK have a big tick by them, so our priority is to break Virgin in America and in other countries, so I am spending much of my time here or travelling.

How do you keep in touch with news and events at home?

The *Financial Times* is delivered to the island each day, although it is 24 hours late. I also get *The Economist*, *Newsweek* and a wonderful magazine called *Foreign Affairs*. Cuttings about Virgin companies come through on the fax machine constantly from all over the world. All our key managing directors get the same cuttings. There is an organisation that we pay to do it, but I can't remember what it is called... erm, I think it is the Press Gazette — oh, no, that's you!

I am also kept up to date by e-mail, not just on Virgin matters, but on subjects that are important to us, such as oil refineries being battered by hurricanes. I also check boring things such as oil and currency prices continually online.

And TV news?

I keep in touch through the BBC, and I think Sky News is excellent, very refreshing. CNN has lost that international approach and has become very American parochial, which is extremely bizarre and sad for a network that should be global in its thinking.

What did you think of Tony Blair's apparent comments to Rupert Murdoch about the BBC's reporting of hurricane Katrina?
Um... what was the comment?

[A fellow tycoon's stirring clearly didn't make the Necker News, so I bring him up to speed.]

Well, I saw a lot of the coverage and it did not seem anti-American to me, so I doubt the BBC deserves that criticism. If you look at some American TV channels — Fox for one — the news is so pro-America and is not willing to be critical at all. That is damaging for a country and is not giving the people of America a true view of the world, which is dangerous.

You have so many businesses, yet have not added newspapers to the empire. Have you seriously



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[Clearly distracted, Branson then asks:] Rob, can I ask a big favour and call you back in about five minutes? Someone needs my help with something. [He comes back on the line soon after, chuckling.] That was rather appropriate — I have just had the *News of the World* on saying it is splashing on a story that I had an affair with Kate Moss and would I like to comment. And my answer was — I wish!

Well, sometimes it's best to confess — you know, unburden your soul. Ever had an affair with her, or even fancied her?

[Still chuckling] There are millions of them out there that I fancy, but that does not mean I have had an affair with them.

We found Kate through our model agency Storm when she was 15, and we've been friends ever since. We have not been in touch directly since the stories, but I wish her well. As delightful and flattering as it would be to have had an affair with her, I am far too old for Kate. It's a load of bollocks.

You have had a long-running and, at times, a quite rampant affair with the press. That can't be an easy balancing act in itself?

My approach is to be extremely open and I always take the call if I can. I have a very honest relationship with the press and 99.9 per cent of the time we are treated in an honest way back. I think they are there to keep a check on how one behaves. I do my best to conduct my life on the basis that I am not going to be unhappy with what I read — personally, or business-wise. A vibrant and free press in the UK that is questioning all the time is crucial. As a profile figure you have to take the rough with the smooth. Often the most harmful damage is done by inaccurate stories about people who are not that well known — it is harder for them to fight back.

How seriously do you take the coverage Virgin gets?
I keep closely in touch because your reputation is all you have got in life. Latest research shows that the Virgin brand is the most respected in Britain among men and third among women. There are journalists writing about Virgin companies every day and effectively they are our judge and jury on whether we are performing well. I have never sued a paper because it takes too much energy, but if somebody writes something inaccurate, I will write a letter to correct it and get our point of view across.

How important was the press for you during the British Airways dirty tricks campaign of the 1990s?
BA was using the press and public relations people to damage our character. There were all kinds of dirty tricks going on to put us out of business. The press and television were vital for us in order to fight back and I suspect they helped Virgin Atlantic avoid going bankrupt — it was that important.

When we won the High Court libel case, the headline in *The Sun* was "Virgin Screws BA". I have that on a wall somewhere. I spoke to Kelvin MacKenzie the night before it appeared and he said he wished BA had won because he had an alternative headline that was more fun — "BA Screws Virgin".

You are known for some pretty clever publicity stunts. Any favourites?

With PR, it is important to do things that make people smile. I landed a UFO in a foggy field near Gatwick about 20 years ago, which caused a sensation, and when BA was lobbying to stop us flying out of Heathrow, we took over Concorde and decked it up as a Virgin plane. It got enormous worldwide publicity and raised a smile. But the best one was created by British Airways with its dirty tricks campaign. It backfired so dramatically and ensured Virgin Atlantic's future more than anything else.

What is more important to you — a spread in the tabloids or a piece in the FT?

A mass-market paper is more important to us than the business pages because of pure circulation. But, with my business hat on, we care about what *Les* writes in the FT, because it does have a lot of influence, even if we don't always agree with it.

You are well known for having a short attention span, so do you ever actually read a paper cover to cover?

No interview would be complete without some discreet product placement. We aim to be a bit more up front, so feel free to pull *The Blatant Plug...* Virgin Atlantic now has the Upper Class Suite, which has the longest, widest and most comfortable seat flying. But unlike British Airways, we only charge a business class fare, not a first class fare. Thank you very much!

I am a very quick reader, so I can scan a paper in five minutes and absorb what I need. I might tear out certain articles if I want to read them in more depth later.

I like editorials and I glance through the business pages of all the papers when I am at home. It is important for me to keep in touch with what our rivals are doing. I like the tabloids, but I am not really into gossip, so I don't read that. I love all sports, particularly tennis and cricket and, of course, ballooning.

Surveys often mark you out as the person most people would prefer to be. You are even a shoe-in for No. 10 if you could be bothered to stand for election. Must be lovely for the old ego?

It is always nice to read nice things, but one must not let one's head get too big. You know that a day or two later someone will bring you down with a bump, whether it be your wife or your children, or some journalist. My wife is very down to earth. A few months ago I got very excited while watching SpaceShipOne on CNN with Virgin folding out in space, but my wife just carried on packing some clothes in a case and took no notice. Wives and journalists are very good at keeping you grounded.

If you could adopt one newspaper and stick the Virgin name on it, which would it be?
I am not sure about a newspaper, so I would go for *The Virgin Playboy*.

[A short while after our chat, Branson calls me on the mobile, chuckling as ever.]

Rob, it's Richard again. I have had the *News of the World* back on with some more details of its story. Apparently, Kate was on Necker with Keith Richards. I caught them in the bedroom doing cocaine. I was appalled at first, but then I had a line and that made Kate think I was really groovy, so she started having an affair with me! Kate and Keith have never been to Necker. It's very funny, but all other bollocks!

Rob.McGibbon@virgin.net (No bonus plug intended!)

Richard Branson's FANTASY FLYERS

What would be the Fantasy Headline of the story you would most like to read?

How about: "Planet Earth Renamed Virgin Territory".

What would be the Fantasy Headline involving yourself?

As oil prices are soaring and Virgin is going into space, it would be something like: "Branson Finds Oil On Mars".

What would be the headline you most dread?

"Branson Goes Bananas" — but I think my family already think I have.

Who would you most like to interview and what question would you ask that they had to answer truthfully?

President Bush. "By invading Iraq, have you created more terrorists and made the world less safe?"

What question would you never answer?

I have always tried to keep my family life out of the press, so it would be anything about my family.

What would you like the headline to be on your obituary?

"Mould-breaking Entrepreneur Dies In Bed Aged 180." And if I am that old, I will certainly be very mouldy!



Purely as an entrepreneur, what do you think of the long-term outlook for newspapers as a business?

I am sure there will be a casualty or two over the next 10 years as more advertising goes to internet sites and other ways of getting messages across. However, if you have a quality newspaper, I am sure it will still be around in 50 years' time, but newspapers have to adapt in much the same way the Virgin Megastores have to while they are under attack from iPod and downloading. To survive, newspapers will have to use their brands to sell other products to bring in new income.

You generally get a good press, but what has been one of the nastier stories?

One of the more unpleasant ones was coming down to find two journalists from the *News of the World* in the kitchen. My wife and I had recently lost our first child [their daughter Clare died four days after being born three months premature in 1980]. They wanted to know why we weren't looking after the funeral stone better. It was about the most below the belt accusation imaginable. I pushed them out pretty quickly, but they still ran the story.

BRANSON'S NEWS SCHEDULE

Newspapers:
The Times, *FT*, *Telegraph*, *Sun* and *Mirror*.

Columns and Writers:
I always read the Lex column in the FT. Simon Jenkins (now of The Guardian) is one of my favourite writers and there are few things he has ever written I disagree with. I tried to get him to run for Mayor of London once, but I failed to convince him.

Magazines:
The Economist, *Newsweek* and *Foreign Affairs*.

Radio:
I am the wrong side of 55, so I listen to Virgin Radio less these days. I like the *Today* programme on Radio 4 and tune in if I have time.

Television:
I like Sky News and the BBC.

Website:
Of course, it has to be www.virgin.com