

# TEDTalks, Richard Branson

## Life at 30,000 feet

00:11	Chris Anderson: Welcome to TED.
00:12	Richard Branson: Thank you very much. The first TED has been great.
00:16	CA: Have you met anyone interesting?
00:18	RB: Well, the nice thing about TED is everybody's interesting. I was very glad to see Goldie Hawn, because I had an apology to make to her. I'd had dinner with her about two years ago and I'd – she had this big wedding ring and I put it on my finger and I couldn't get it off. And I went home to my wife that night and she wanted to know why I had another woman's big, massive, big wedding ring on my finger. And, anyway, the next morning we had to go along to the jeweler and get it cut off. So – (Laughter) – so apologies to Goldie.
00:53	CA: That's pretty good. So, we're going to put up some slides of some of your companies here. You've started one or two in your time. So, you know, Virgin Atlantic, Virgin Records – I guess it all started with a magazine called Student. And then, yes, all these other ones as well. I mean, how do you do this?
01:15	RB: I read all these sort of TED instructions: you must not talk about your own business, and this, and now you ask me. So I suppose you're not going to be able to kick me off the stage, since you asked the question. (Laughter)
01:26	CA: It depends what the answer is though.
01:29	RB: No, I mean, I think I learned early on that if you can run one company, you can really run any companies. I mean, companies are all about finding the right people, inspiring those people, you know, drawing out the best in people. And I just love learning and I'm incredibly inquisitive and I love taking on, you know, the status quo and trying to turn it upside down. So I've seen life as one long learning process. And if I see – you know, if I fly on somebody else's airline and find the experience is not a pleasant one, which it wasn't, 21 years ago, then I'd think, well, you know, maybe I can create the kind of airline that I'd like to fly on. And so, you know, so got one secondhand 747 from Boeing and gave it a go.
02:22	CA: Well, that was a bizarre thing, because you made this move that a lot of people advised you was crazy. And in fact, in a way, it almost took down your empire at one point. I had a conversation with one of the investment bankers who, at the time when you basically sold Virgin Records and invested heavily in Virgin Atlantic, and his view was that you were trading, you know, the world's fourth biggest record company for the twenty-fifth biggest airline and that you were out of your mind. Why did you do that?
02:53	RB: Well, I think that there's a very thin dividing line between success and failure. And I think if you start a business without financial backing, you're likely to go the wrong side of that dividing line. We had – we were being attacked by British Airways. They were trying to put our airline out of business, and they launched what's become known as the dirty tricks campaign. And I realized that the whole empire was likely to come crashing down unless I chipped in a chip. And in order to protect the jobs of the people who worked for the airline, and protect the jobs of the people who worked for the record company, I had to sell the family jewelry to protect the airline.
03:42	CA: Post-Napster, you're looking like a bit of a genius, actually, for that as well.
03:46	RB: Yeah, as it turned out, it proved to be the right move. But, yeah, it was sad at the time, but we moved on.
03:58	CA: Now, you use the Virgin brand a lot and it seems like you're getting synergy from one thing to the other. What does the brand stand for in your head?
04:06	RB: Well, I like to think it stands for quality, that you know, if somebody comes across a Virgin company, they –
04:12	CA: They are quality, Richard. Come on now, everyone says quality. Spirit?
04:14	RB: No, but I was going to move on this. We have a lot of fun and I think the people who work for it enjoy it. As I say, we go in and shake up other industries, and I think, you know, we do it differently and I think that industries are not quite the same as a result of Virgin attacking the market.
04:33	CA: I mean, there are a few launches you've done where the brand maybe hasn't worked quite as well. I mean, Virgin Brides – what happened there? (Laughter)
04:43	RB: We couldn't find any customers. (Laughter) (Applause)
04:49	CA: I was actually also curious why – I think you missed an opportunity with your condoms launch. You called it Mates. I mean, couldn't you have used the Virgin brand for that as well? Ain't virgin no longer, or something.

05:01	RB: Again, we may have had problems finding customers. I mean, we had – often, when you launch a company and you get customer complaints, you know, you can deal with them. But about three months after the launch of the condom company, I had a letter, a complaint, and I sat down and wrote a long letter back to this lady apologizing profusely. But obviously, there wasn't a lot I could do about it. And then six months later, or nine months after the problem had taken, I got this delightful letter with a picture of the baby asking if I'd be godfather, which I became. So, it all worked out well.
05:39	CA: Really? You should have brought a picture. That's wonderful.
05:42	RB: I should have.
05:43	CA: So, just help us with some of the numbers. I mean, what are the numbers on this? I mean, how big is the group overall? How much – what's the total revenue?
05:51	RB: It's about 25 billion dollars now, in total.
05:54	CA: And how many employees?
05:55	RB: About 55,000.
05:58	CA: So, you've been photographed in various ways at various times and never worrying about putting your dignity on the line or anything like that. What was that? Was that real?
06:14	RB: Yeah. We were launching a megastore in Los Angeles, I think. No, I mean, I think – CA: But is that your hair? RB: No. CA: What was that one?
06:25	RB: Dropping in for tea.
06:26	CA: OK. (Laughter)
06:30	RB: Ah, that was quite fun. That was a wonderful car-boat in which –
06:33	CA: Oh, that car that we – actually we – it was a TEDster event there, I think. Is that – could you still pause on that one actually, for a minute? (Laughter)
06:41	RB: It's a tough job, isn't it?
06:42	CA: I mean, it is a tough job. (Laughter) When I first came to America, I used to try this with employees as well and they kind of – they have these different rules over here, it's very strange.
06:52	RB: I know, I have – the lawyers say you mustn't do things like that, but –
06:57	CA: I mean, speaking of which, tell us about –
06:58	RB: "Pammy" we launched, you know – mistakenly thought we could take on Coca-Cola, and we launched a cola bottle called "The Pammy" and it was shaped a bit like Pamela Anderson. But the trouble is, it kept on tipping over, but – (Laughter)
07:16	CA: Designed by Philippe Starck perhaps?
07:18	RB: Of course.
07:20	CA: So, we'll just run a couple more pictures here. Virgin Brides. Very nice. And, OK, so stop there. This was – you had some award I think?
07:32	RB: Yeah, well, 25 years earlier, we'd launched the Sex Pistols' "God Save The Queen," and I'd certainly never expected that 25 years later – that she'd actually knight us. But somehow, she must have had a forgetful memory, I think.
07:47	CA: Well, God saved her and you got your just reward. Do you like to be called Sir Richard, or how?
07:53	RB: Nobody's ever called me Sir Richard. Occasionally in America, I hear people saying Sir Richard and think there's some Shakespearean play taking place. But nowhere else anyway.
08:06	CA: OK. So can you use your knighthood for anything or is it just ...
08:11	RB: No. I suppose if you're having problems getting a booking in a restaurant or something, that might be worth using it.
08:18	CA: You know, it's not Richard Branson. It's Sir Richard Branson.
08:23	RB: I'll go get the secretary to use it.
08:26	CA: OK. So let's look at the space thing. I think, with us, we've got a video that shows what you're up to, and Virgin Galactic up in the air. (Video) So that's the Bert Rutan designed spaceship?
08:43	RB: Yeah, it'll be ready in – well, ready in 12 months and then we do 12 months extensive testing. And then 24 months from now, people will be able to take a ride into space.
09:00	CA: So this interior is Philippe Starcke designed?
09:03	RB: Philippe has done the – yeah, quite a bit of it: the logos and he's building the space station in New Mexico. And basically, he's just taken an eye and the space station will be one giant eye, so when you're in space, you ought to be able to see this massive eye looking up at you. And when you land, you'll be able to go back into this giant eye. But he's an absolute genius when it comes to design.

09:36	CA: But you didn't have him design the engine?
09:39	RB: Philippe is quite erratic, so I think that he wouldn't be the best person to design the engine, no.
09:45	CA: He gave a wonderful talk here two days ago.
09:47	RB: Yeah? No, he is a –
09:48	CA: Well, some people found it wonderful, some people found it completely bizarre. But, I personally found it wonderful.
09:54	RB: He's a wonderful enthusiast, which is why I love him. But ...
10:00	CA: So, now, you've always had this exploration bug in you. Have you ever regretted that?
10:08	RB: Many times. I mean, I think with the ballooning and boating expeditions we've done in the past. Well, I got pulled out of the sea I think six times by helicopters, so – and each time, I didn't expect to come home to tell the tale. So in those moments, you certainly wonder what you're doing up there or –
10:29	CA: What was the closest you got to – when did you think, this is it, I might be on my way out?
10:35	RB: Well, I think the balloon adventures were – each one was, each one, actually, I think we came close. And, I mean, first of all we – nobody had actually crossed the Atlantic in a hot air balloon before, so we had to build a hot air balloon that was capable of flying in the jet stream, and we weren't quite sure, when a balloon actually got into the jet stream, whether it would actually survive the 200, 220 miles an hour winds that you can find up there. And so, just the initial lift off from Sugarloaf to cross the Atlantic, as we were pushing into the jet stream, this enormous balloon – the top of the balloon ended up going at a couple of hundred miles an hour, the capsule that we were in at the bottom was going at maybe two miles an hour, and it just took off. And it was like holding onto a thousand horses. And we were just crossing every finger, praying that the balloon would hold together, which, fortunately, it did. But the ends of all those balloon trips were, you know – something seemed to go wrong every time, and on that particular occasion, the more experienced balloonist who was with me jumped, and left me holding on for dear life. (Laughter)
12:01	CA: Did he tell you to jump, or he just said, "I'm out of here!" and ...
12:04	RB: No, he told me jump, but once his weight had gone, the balloon just shot up to 12,000 feet and I ...
12:14	CA: And you inspired an Ian McEwan novel I think with that.
12:17	RB: Yeah. No, I put on my oxygen mask and stood on top of the balloon, with my parachute, looking at the swirling clouds below, trying to pluck up my courage to jump into the North Sea, which – and it was a very, very, very lonely few moments. But, anyway, we managed to survive it.
12:33	CA: Did you jump? Or it came down in the end?
12:35	RB: Well, I knew I had about half an hour's fuel left, and I also knew that the chances were that if I jumped, I would only have a couple of minutes of life left. So I climbed back into the capsule and just desperately tried to make sure that I was making the right decision. And wrote some notes to my family. And then climbed back up again, looked down at those clouds again, climbed back into the capsule again. And then finally, just thought, there's a better way. I've got, you know, this enormous balloon above me, it's the biggest parachute ever, why not use it? And so I managed to fly the balloon down through the clouds, and about 50 feet, before I hit the sea, threw myself over. And the balloon hit the sea and went shooting back up to 10,000 feet without me. But it was a wonderful feeling being in that water and –
13:31	CA: What did you write to your family?
13:34	RB: Just what you would do in a situation like that: just I love you very much. And I'd already written them a letter before going on this trip, which – just in case anything had happened. But fortunately, they never had to use it.
13:53	CA: Your companies have had incredible PR value out of these heroics. The years – and until I stopped looking at the polls, you were sort of regarded as this great hero in the U.K. and elsewhere. And cynics might say, you know, this is just a smart business guy doing what it takes to execute his particular style of marketing. How much was the PR value part of this? RB: Well, of course, the PR experts said that as an airline owner, the last thing you should be doing is heading off in balloons and boats, and crashing into the seas. (Laughter)
14:42	CA: They have a point, Richard.
14:44	RB: In fact, I think our airline took a full page ad at the time saying, you know, come on, Richard, there are better ways of crossing the Atlantic. (Laughter)
14:54	CA: To do all this, you must have been a genius from the get-go, right?
15:00	RB: Well, I won't contradict that. (Laughter)
15:04	CA: OK, this isn't exactly hardball. OK.

15:08	Didn't – weren't you just terrible at school?
15:12	RB: I was dyslexic. I had no understanding of schoolwork whatsoever. I certainly would have failed IQ tests. And it was one of the reasons I left school when I was 15 years old. And if I – if I'm not interested in something, I don't grasp it. As somebody who's dyslexic, you also have some quite bizarre situations. I mean, for instance, I've had to – you know, I've been running the largest group of private companies in Europe, but haven't been able to know the difference between net and gross. And so the board meetings have been fascinating. (Laughter) And so, it's like, good news or bad news? And generally, the people would say, oh, well that's bad news.
16:07	CA: But just to clarify, the 25 billion dollars is gross, right? That's gross? (Laughter)
16:11	RB: Well, I hope it's net actually, having – (Laughter) – I've got it right.
16:19	CA: No, trust me, it's gross. (Laughter)
16:24	RB: So, when I turned 50, somebody took me outside the boardroom and said, "Look Richard, here's a – let me draw on a diagram. Here's a net in the sea, and the fish have been pulled from the sea into this net. And that's the profits you've got left over in this little net, everything else is eaten." And I finally worked it all out. (Laughter) (Applause)
16:48	CA: But, I mean, at school – so as well as being, you know, doing pretty miserably academically, but you were also the captain of the cricket and football teams. So you were kind of a – you were a natural leader, but just a bit of a ... Were you a rebel then, or how would you ...
17:04	RB: Yeah, I think I was a bit of a maverick and – but I ... And I was, yeah, I was fortunately good at sport, and so at least I had something to excel at, at school.
17:19	CA: And some bizarre things happened just earlier in your life. I mean, there's the story about your mother allegedly dumping you in a field, aged four, and saying "OK, walk home." Did this really happen?
17:29	RB: She was, you know, she felt that we needed to stand on our own two feet from an early age. So she did things to us, which now she'd be arrested for, such as pushing us out of the car, and telling us to find our own way to Granny's, about five miles before we actually got there. And making us go on wonderful, long bike rides. And we were never allowed to watch television and the like.
17:54	CA: But is there a risk here? I mean, there's a lot of people in the room who are wealthy, and they've got kids, and we've got this dilemma about how you bring them up. Do you look at the current generation of kids coming up and think they're too coddled, they don't know what they've got, we're going to raise a generation of privileged ...
18:08	RB: No, I think if you're bringing up kids, you just want to smother them with love and praise and enthusiasm. So I don't think you can mollicoddle your kids too much really.
18:24	CA: You didn't turn out too bad, I have to say, I'm ... Your headmaster said to you – I mean he found you kind of an enigma at your school – he said, you're either going to be a millionaire or go to prison, and I'm not sure which. Which of those happened first? (Laughter)
18:41	RB: Well, I've done both. I think I went to prison first. I was actually prosecuted under two quite ancient acts in the U.K. I was prosecuted under the 1889 Venereal Diseases Act and the 1916 Indecent Advertisements Act. On the first occasion, for mentioning the word venereal disease in public, which – we had a center where we would help young people who had problems. And one of the problems young people have is venereal disease. And there's an ancient law that says you can't actually mention the word venereal disease or print it in public. So the police knocked on the door, and told us they were going to arrest us if we carried on mentioning the word venereal disease. We changed it to social diseases and people came along with acne and spots, but nobody came with VD any more. So, we put it back to VD and promptly got arrested. And then subsequently, "Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols," the word bollocks, the police decided was a rude word and so we were arrested for using the word bollocks on the Sex Pistols' album. And John Mortimer, the playwright, defended us. And he asked if I could find a linguistics expert to come up with a different definition of the word bollocks. And so I rang up Nottingham University, and I asked to talk to the professor of linguistics. And he said, "Look, bollocks is not a – has nothing to do with balls whatsoever. It's actually a nickname given to priests in the eighteenth century." (Laughter) And he went, "Furthermore, I'm a priest myself." And so I said, "Would you mind coming to the court?" And he said he'd be delighted. And I said – and he said, "Would you like me to wear my dog collar?" And I said, "Yes, definitely. Please." (Laughter)
20:27	CA: That's great.
20:28	RB: So our key witness argued that it was actually "Never Mind the Priest, Here's the Sex Pistols." (Laughter) And the judge found us – reluctantly found us not guilty, so ... (Laughter)

20:38	CA: That is outrageous. (Applause) So seriously, is there a dark side? A lot of people would say there's no way that someone could put together this incredible collection of businesses without knifing a few people in the back, you know, doing some ugly things. You've been accused of being ruthless. There was a nasty biography written about you by someone. Is any of it true? Is there an element of truth in it?
21:06	RB: I don't actually think that the stereotype of a businessperson treading all over people to get to the top, generally speaking, works. I think if you treat people well, people will come back and come back for more. And I think all you have in life is your reputation and it's a very small world. And I actually think that the best way of becoming a successful business leader is dealing with people fairly and well, and I like to think that's how we run Virgin.
21:47	CA: And what about the people who love you and who see you spending – you keep getting caught up in these new projects, but it almost feels like you're addicted to launching new stuff. You get excited by an idea and, kapow! I mean, do you think about life balance? How do your family feel about each time you step into something big and new?
22:06	RB: I also believe that being a father's incredibly important, so from the time the kids were very young, you know, when they go on holiday, I go on holiday with them. And so we spend a very good sort of three months away together. Yes, I'll, you know, be in touch. We're very lucky, we have this tiny little island in the Caribbean and we can – so I can take them there and we can bring friends, and we can play together, but I can also keep in touch with what's going on.
22:40	CA: You started talking in recent years about this term capitalist philanthropy. What is that?
22:46	RB: Capitalism has been proven to be a system that works. You know, the alternative, communism, has not worked. But the problem with capitalism is extreme wealth ends up in the hands of a few people, and therefore extreme responsibility, I think, goes with that wealth. And I think it's important that the individuals, who are in that fortunate position, do not end up competing for bigger and bigger boats, and bigger and bigger cars, but, you know, use that money to either create new jobs or to tackle issues around the world.
23:26	CA: And what are the issues that you worry about most, care most about, want to turn your resources toward?
23:33	RB: Well, there's – I mean there's a lot of issues. I mean global warming certainly is a massive threat to mankind and we are putting a lot of time and energy into, A, trying to come up with alternative fuels and, B, you know, we just launched this prize, which is really a prize in case we don't get an answer on alternative fuels, in case we don't actually manage to get the carbon emissions cut down quickly, and in case we go through the tipping point. We need to try to encourage people to come up with a way of extracting carbon out of the Earth's atmosphere. And we just – you know, there weren't really people working on that before, so we wanted people to try to – all the best brains in the world to start thinking about that, and also to try to extract the methane out of the Earth's atmosphere as well. And actually, we've had about 15,000 people fill in the forms saying they want to give it a go. And so we only need one, so we're hopeful.
24:42	CA: And you're also working in Africa on a couple of projects?
24:46	RB: Yes, I mean, we've got – we're setting up something called the war room, which is maybe the wrong word. We're trying to – maybe we'll change it – but anyway, it's a war room to try to coordinate all the attack that's going on in Africa, all the different social problems in Africa, and try to look at best practices. So, for instance, there's a doctor in Africa that's found that if you give a mother antiretroviral drugs at 24 weeks, when she's pregnant, that the baby will not have HIV when it's born. And so disseminating that information to around the rest of Africa is important.
25:33	CA: The war room sounds, it sounds powerful and dramatic. And is there a risk that the kind of the business heroes of the West get so excited about – I mean, they're used to having an idea, getting stuff done, and they believe profoundly in their ability to make a difference in the world. Is there a risk that we go to places like Africa and say, we've got to fix this problem and we can do it, I've got all these billions of dollars, you know, da, da, da – here's the big idea. And kind of take a much more complex situation and actually end up making a mess of it. Do you worry about that?
26:08	RB: Well, first of all, on this particular situation, we're actually – we're working with the government on it. I mean, Thabo Mbeki's had his problems with accepting HIV and AIDS are related, but this is a way, I think, of him tackling this problem and instead of the world criticizing him, it's a way of working with him, with his government. It's important that if people do go to Africa and do try to help, they don't just go in there and then leave after a few years. It's got to be consistent. But I think business leaders can bring their entrepreneurial know-how and help governments approach things slightly differently. For instance, we're setting up clinics in Africa where we're going to be giving free antiretroviral drugs, free TB treatment and free malaria treatment. But we're also trying to make them self-sustaining clinics, so that people pay for some other aspects.

27:09	CA: I mean a lot of cynics say about someone like yourself, or Bill Gates, or whatever, that this is really being – it's almost driven by some sort of desire again, you know, for the right image, for guilt avoidance and not like a real philanthropic instinct. What would you say to them?
27:25	RB: Well, I think that everybody – people do things for a whole variety of different reasons and I think that, you know, when I'm on me deathbed, I will want to feel that I've made a difference to other people's lives. And that may be a selfish thing to think, but it's the way I've been brought up. I think if I'm in a position to radically change other people's lives for the better, I should do so.
27:50	CA: How old are you?
27:51	RB: I'm 56.
27:52	CA: I mean, the psychologist Erik Erikson says that – as I understand him and I'm a total amateur – but that during 30s, 40s people are driven by this desire to grow and that's where they get their fulfillment. 50s, 60s, the mode of operation shifts more to the quest for wisdom and a search for legacy. I mean, it seems like you're still a little bit in the growth phases, you're still doing these incredible new plans. How much do you think about legacy, and what would you like your legacy to be?
28:27	RB: I don't think I think too much about legacy. I mean, I like to – you know, my grandmother lived to 101, so hopefully I've got another 30 or 40 years to go. No, I just want to live life to its full. You know, if I can make a difference, I hope to be able to make a difference. And I think one of the positive things at the moment is you've got Sergey and Larry from Google, for instance, who are good friends. And, thank God, you've got two people who genuinely care about the world and with that kind of wealth. If they had that kind of wealth and they didn't care about the world, it would be very worrying. And you know they're going to make a hell of a difference to the world. And I think it's important that people in that kind of position do make a difference.
29:20	CA: Well, Richard, when I was starting off in business, I knew nothing about it and I also was sort of – I thought that business people were supposed to just be ruthless and that that was the only way you could have a chance of succeeding. And you actually did inspire me. I looked at you, I thought, well, he's made it. Maybe there is a different way. So I would like to thank you for that inspiration, and for coming to TED today. Thank you. Thank you so much. (Applause)