

# Sir Richard Branson

On his banana-boat rescue.

**BACK IN 1984**, we started the airline Virgin Atlantic with one plane. We didn't have the advertising money to spend to compete with British Airways, so I kept trying to think of a way to get us on the map without spending too much money.

I decided to build a boat, the *Virgin Atlantic Challenger*, with the idea of trying to break the record for the fastest speed ever across the Atlantic Ocean. There is an award for this called the Blue Riband, and the last holder was an

American boat. I thought that if I could get the Blue Riband back for Britain, it would help our new young airline.

Even though my wife, Joan, was eight months' pregnant, I began the trip and hoped to get back in time. It started very well. We were breaking the record, and then about 200 miles from England, after nearly three and a half days at sea, the boat broke in two. The crew and I ended up in life rafts and were rescued by a banana boat that was heading back to Jamaica. A couple who happened to be on the boat put their arms around me and said, "You poor boy, you just had a newborn son. Would you like to see a picture of him?" And they showed me my son on the front page of the *Daily Mail* newspaper in England. Meanwhile, as helicopters and the press began flying over, the only thing that was sticking out of the water was the big Virgin sign on the boat.

So that was my favorite mistake. But the English people like the underdog. They don't like people who are always success-



ful the first time out. And I think the trip became a much, much bigger story than if it had been successful. Our airline took out a full-page ad with a photo of the boat sticking out of the water. The line said, "It's Virgin. Take the plane." Afterward, Virgin Atlantic was well and truly established and everybody knew the Virgin brand name.

The following year we built another boat, the *Virgin Atlantic Challenger II*, and got across the Atlantic, breaking the record

in pursuit of the Blue Riband. I love doing adventurous things and attempting to break world records. Trying things—even if you fall flat on your face—is more important than not trying at all. And if you do fail at something, you should pick yourself up and keep trying until you succeed. At Virgin, even if we fail the first time, we do try to succeed the second or the third time. We don't give up.

That experience taught me that if you do something fun that people enjoy, and can also promote your brand, it can be far more effective than local advertising. It helped give the Virgin brand a sexy global image, which is much more difficult for someone like British Airways to try to emulate. People identified with Virgin Atlantic because it was exciting and it pushed the limits. We continued this the next year as we set out to become the first to cross the Atlantic in a hot-air balloon ... but that's another story. **nw**

## CAREER ARC

**1973**  
Releases the first album on his new Virgin Records label.

**1985**  
Capsizes the *Virgin Atlantic Challenger* while promoting his new airline.

**2000**  
Earns knighthood for his services to entrepreneurship.

**2011**  
Opens the world's first commercial spaceport for Virgin Galactic.

**2012**  
Publishes his latest book, *Like a Virgin: Secrets They Won't Teach You at Business School*.

## INTERVIEW BY KARA CUTRUZZULA

Newsweek (ISSN 0028-9604), October 15, 2012, Volume CLX, No. 16. Newsweek publishes weekly, except when combined issues counting as two issues are published, and when an additional special issue may be published. In the U.S. send subscription inquiries to Newsweek, PO Box 433172, Palm Coast, FL 32143-3172. In Canada: Newsweek, PO Box 4067, Postal Station A, Toronto, ON M5W2K1, Canada Post International Publications Mail (Canadian Distribution) Sales Agreement No. 40051822, Canadian GST No. 123-321-309. Customer Service: www.nws.com or 800-631-1040. Subscribers: If the Post Office alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within two years. A one-year subscription (52 issues) is \$41.08 and Canadian \$61.88 (combined issues, when published, count as two issues; any additional special issues, published from time to time, count as an issue). Unless otherwise indicated by source or currency designation, all terms and prices are applicable in the U.S. only and may not apply in Canada. © 2012 by The Newsweek/Daily Beast Company LLC. All rights reserved. 555 West 18th Street, New York, NY 10011. Barry Diller, Executive Chairman; Randy L. Shapiro, General Counsel and Secretary. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTERS: send address changes to Newsweek, PO Box 433172, Palm Coast, FL 32143-3172. Printed in U.S.A. We may make a portion of our mailing list available to a select group of companies whose products or services may be of interest to you. If you would prefer that we not disclose your personal information for this purpose, please contact subscriber services by mail, phone or email at www.nws.com. Your choice will not affect the cost of your service. To order reprints, e-prints, posters, and plaques, or request permission to republish Newsweek content, please contact our representative PARS International by visiting: www.NewsweekReprints.com.