

Richard Branson dishes on Virgin, space and the Obamas

July 2 2017, by Tali Arbel



In this Monday, March 27, 2017, file photo, Richard Branson, founder of Virgin Atlantic and the Virgin Group, smiles after he arrived on a flight from London to Seattle, at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport in Seattle. Branson's prolific Virgin brand has spanned a broad range of businesses, including record stores, banks, phones, airlines and spaceships. He's now trying to help Sprint revitalize its Virgin Mobile brand by transforming it into an iPhone-only carrier. He tells The Associated Press that Virgin is synonymous with really good quality, as is Apple, giving Virgin "a real chance to break in." (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren, File)

British billionaire Richard Branson's prolific Virgin brand has spanned a broad range of businesses, including record stores, banks, phones, airlines and spaceships.

He's now trying to help Sprint revitalize its Virgin Mobile brand in a U.S. wireless market that's gotten so competitive that unlimited-data deals, once rare, are the norm. Discounts and freebies are plentiful at the major wireless carriers.

Virgin Mobile is phasing out Android phones and transforming itself into an iPhone-only carrier with an eye-catching price: Buy an iPhone and pay \$1 for unlimited data for six months (or one year if you sign up by the end of July). Service normally is \$50 a month.

Branson spoke with The Associated Press about the Virgin brand and why loving an airline may or may not nudge someone into switching phone carriers. Questions and answers have been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Americans hate their phone and cable companies. Virgin is limiting [phone](#) selection, selling unlimited service pretty cheap and offering a two-for-one deal on Virgin Atlantic flights to the U.K. (customers still pay taxes and fees on both tickets). Will that make consumers love Virgin Mobile?

A: I think Virgin is synonymous with really good quality, like Virgin America or Virgin Atlantic or the space program. The two brands, Apple and Virgin, have some similarities. Apple gives Virgin a real chance to break in. And people can get a free ticket to London. I think people will like it.

Q: What sway does the Virgin brand still have in the U.S.?

A: The Virgin Megastores (music store), a lot of people remember. In most instances, if an industry disappears, like the record industry, that would be the end of the brand. With Virgin, we are one of the few brands in the world where we build new industries all the time. We're launching Virgin Mobile with a really big push behind it. That will keep the Virgin brand alive and healthy.

Q: Virgin America has been a consumer favorite, with its purple lighting, power outlets, TVs and leather seats. Alaska Airlines, which owns it now, is going to shut down the brand. Are you thinking about a new airline venture in the U.S.?

A: All I can say is watch this space. I can't say anything more than that.

Q: There's also a Virgin commercial space venture. Why is that business important?

A: Already next year we will be into space with Virgin Galactic. It's one of the few companies offering people the chance to go to [space](#). That will be a fantastic thing. The halo effect from that on the Virgin [brand](#) will be great as well.

Q: You hosted Barack and Michelle Obama on your Caribbean island

after they left the White House. How was it?

A: They learned to kite-surf. I'm glad to say they got a big smile on their faces, which they very much deserved. They had been working so much on behalf of all of us in the world.

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