



**Genius Network Interview**

Joe Polish Interviews:

*Jean Oelwang*

*Managing Director of  
Virgin Unite*



***“Making A Difference  
The **Virgin Unite** Way”***



Joe Polish's Tempe, Arizona office – headquarters for Piranha Marketing – is often referred to by marketing insiders as “action central” for much of the entrepreneurial world. Though he made his fortune in an almost invisible niche by telling carpet cleaners how to crush the competition and turn their small local businesses into money-churning machines, he is now among the most well-known, respected, “complete marketing geniuses” in the world.

Consulting clients from many different countries each happily pay up to \$20,000 a day just to hear his advise. His “boot camps” attract convention-sized audiences full of famous entrepreneurs and many of the “superstars” of marketing and advertising.

In a business environment bristling with false prophets and bad advice, Joe's unique mix of real-world experience and stunning financial success has earned him a spot among the most trusted experts alive. His one-of-a-kind recorded interview series, “The Genius Network” is a “Who's Who” of super-savvy marketing and advertising brilliance.

No one refuses an interview with Joe. He has the gift of gab and the insight of a business veteran who's earned his success. The “best in the biz” seek him out. He knows the good, the bad, and the ugly of what's working – and what's not working – on the Web, in infomercials, in direct response ads and direct mail, in niche marketing, in personal coaching and in every critical area of the entrepreneurial landscape.

The business world is moving faster than ever before. Staying close to the action means paying attention to Joe Polish and Piranha Marketing.





Jean's career has spanned both the corporate and social sector which has driven a strong desire to look at ways which the two can work together to drive positive social change.

On the corporate side, she has worked for many years in the telecommunications industry mainly in the field of marketing to help start up new companies in countries such as, the US, the UK, Bulgaria, Colombia, South Africa, Singapore, Hong Kong and Australia. Her most recent role was as Joint Managing Director for Virgin Mobile in Australia.

On the social sector side, she has worked mainly with underprivileged young people and the environment in a range of countries.

In her current role she is heading up Virgin Unite, the independent charitable arm of the Virgin Group, where she has the opportunity to work with all the Virgin businesses to use their entrepreneurial spirit, resources and people to tackle some of the tougher social challenges.



## Introduction to Making a Difference.

To use their own analogy, Virgin Unite (a charitable division of Virgin Group) is a sort of matchmaking service that connects entrepreneurs, businesses, and celebrities with not-for-profit organizations. This service is particularly beneficial to persons or businesses unsure of where to target their philanthropy and to social organizations with no connection to donors. Thus, acting as a pre-screening middleman, Virgin Unite pairs the well-intentioned donors with the needy social causes. One could almost call it a charitable E-Harmony.

In typical Virgin fashion, the company pursues this noble cause with a fun-loving spirit. Their latest advertising campaign features the virtuous alternative to the seven deadly sins (ie. sloth vs. spirit, lust vs. love, and pride vs. proud). Mark Smith, the creator of the campaign, said, “In the true Virgin spirit, we wanted to create something different; something that would challenge the traditional approach in the charity sector. We didn’t want to engage people on a guilt level. Virgin Unite is about having fun – It’s about celebrating the reality of how people live their lives, whilst encouraging them to donate time to Unite Partners.”

The employees are proud to be directly involved in Virgin Unite’s efforts, and they do so in varying ways. Some work on the frontlines by volunteering their time overseas; others support the backend by helping to select participating charities (aka Unite Partners, of which there are currently 15). Regardless of their level of involvement, all Virgin employees imbue a sense of fun and passion into their philanthropic crusade.

A core value of Virgin Unite is entrepreneurship. As a result, the Virgin Group and its corporate partners seek every opportunity to apply their business know-how to struggling markets. In Africa, for example, Virgin Unite established a Nigerian airline to create jobs and to give the Nigerian people newfound opportunity for travel. Virgin Unite also founded The Branson School of Entrepreneurship in Johannesburg (2005) to provide better education to the South African youth.

Creativity is another key strategy for global change, as Virgin Unite sees it. In one innovative moment, the organization decided to send medical workers



into rural Sub-Saharan Africa on motorbikes to deliver desperately needed medication. Virgin Unite also initiated a “Music Movement,” led by singer Natalie Imbruglia (the first Unite Ambassador), to literally give a voice to social causes. This unique coupling of modern technologies with old problems is nothing short of inventive.

Ultimately, Virgin Unite lives out the old-fashioned principle of helping a neighbor in need. But instead of assisting a next-door neighbor, the organization mobilizes global resources to help entire neighboring countries. Of course, this only comes with the help of charitable businesses and celebrities. Whether one can donate time, money, materials, or a voice to a social ill, Virgin Unite welcomes any and all support.

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**Joe:** Hello, this is **Joe Polish**, president of Piranha Marketing and founder of the Genius Network Interview Series. And you’re about to hear one of my Genius Network interviews. I just want to thank you for taking the time to listen to this and I hope you find it very useful.

If you want to find more information about some of the interviews and resources that can help you in your business, you can go to [www.JoePolish.com](http://www.JoePolish.com). There, we have a “Joe Polish Recommends” section, with all kinds of resources, vendors, services and products that can be of help to you. Also for additional interviews and a whole list of other people that I’ve interviewed, you can go to [www.GeniusNetwork.com](http://www.GeniusNetwork.com).

Thanks, and enjoy the interview.

### **Who Is Jean Oelwang?**

Today, I have a fascinating interview for everybody. I’ve got Ms. Jean Oelwang, in the UK, on the line. Jean, can you hear me OK?



**Jean:** Yeah, I can hear you perfect, Joe.

**Joe:** Wonderful.

So Jean, anything that was not mentioned about you, that is in this bio, that you'd like the listeners to know about you and about Virgin Unite?

**Jean:** I think you covered most of the points there. As we go through the interview, we can talk a little bit more about Virgin Unite, which is the independent, charitable arm of the Virgin Group.

### What Is The Mission Of Virgin Unite?

**Joe:** Wonderful. The way this interview came about was I had dinner with Richard Branson and a small group of people in San Francisco, back around October 2006.

Richard talked about some of the things that he was doing in Africa—with teaching entrepreneurship—and I just thought it was fascinating. My belief is that the real way to effect positive change in the world is through entrepreneurship, because that's where value creation starts and takes place and is created...just all of the innovation of entrepreneurs.

Certainly, Virgin is a massively entrepreneurial company and, of course, Richard is one of the best entrepreneurs on the planet.

Through brief discussions with him about what he was doing, I just thought it was fascinating. We ended up connecting and talking a little bit, and here we are.

So, I just want to get a good understanding of what Virgin Unite is all about. And I believe all of the listeners, the majority from at least my world, are entrepreneurs. I think they'll find this quite fascinating.

The first thing I'd like is to get an understanding of the inspiration behind this creation of Richard Branson's. What is the mission of Virgin Unite?



*There needed to be a fresh approach to social and environmental issues.*

**Jean:** I think Richard himself has always been really, really passionate about driving social change in lots of different ways.

When he was a teenager, right when he first started Virgin Records, he found that he and his mates were having trouble getting advice on sexual health issues. So, at the age of 18, he started up a student advisory counseling center that began providing free sexual health advice. And he actually still runs that today; he's funded it for the last thirty years. That was kind of his first endeavor into this area.

Since then, he's done loads of things. He launched a condom company in the UK, he's supported multiple projects, and he helped get Comic Relief off the ground in the UK. I think he came to the point, a few years ago, where he realized that he had this massive asset—this group of different businesses across the globe—that if he really brought them together, we could be a real force for good in the world.

So, about three years ago, he started on a journey with us. We went and spoke with probably over 800 people around the world within the Virgin Groups and also in the social sector, to find out what we should do. And that was really the birth of Virgin Unite.

I think what came out loud and clear is that there needed to be, really, a fresh approach to social and environmental issues, one that kind of turns them upside-down a little bit and looks at them through a whole new lens...through an entrepreneurial lens.

What people felt strongly was Virgin Unite should be all about coming up with a way to draw its total entrepreneurial approaches to social and environmental issues.

So, the reason behind Virgin Unite was to leverage all of those assets across the Virgin Groups and really focus on three core areas. I guess our fundamental belief was that in order to drive long-term change in the world, you really have to look at things from a business approach so that it's sustainable.

From a Virgin Unite perspective, we focus on three core areas. One of those is called "Good Investments," which is really helping to



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inspire the managing directors of the Virgin Group, as well as Richard, with new ventures. That is, to look at profitable business ventures that would really drive social and environmental change.

The second area is a really exciting one that was pioneered by Mohammad, Eunice and a number of others. It looks at how you can take business expertise and social sector expertise and combine the two, to start up social businesses where any profit goes back into helping to scale up the solution to the problem.

And then there is the third area. We felt really passionately that we had so many resources around the world that could be leveraged to help support great social entrepreneurs, that we started up a whole program called, “Connecting People.” We go out and we find the best-of-the-best social entrepreneurs and then help connect our staff, our customers, and celebrities to those great social entrepreneurs.

That’s fundamentally what Virgin Unite is all about - driving entrepreneurial approaches to social and environmental issues. It is our entrepreneurial approach that sets us apart from other charities; coupled with the fact that 100% of all our fundraising goes straight to the frontline because we are fully funded by Sir Richard and the Virgin Group.

### What Are Virgin Unite’s Guiding Principles?

**Joe:** Okay, so there are the guiding principles that you haven’t mentioned. Is there anything else that you’d like to talk about that allows this machine to keep moving forward and growing the way it has?

**Jean:** I think the first guiding principle—and many of these you’ll see align exactly with the Virgin brand values—the first fundamental one was we were really doing this for our people, for our staff and for our customers. So, we make sure that we continue to get them involved and help them guide the direction of that.

The second guiding principle is that we realize we’ll never know what’s best for people on the frontline, so we always partner with other



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organizations and social entrepreneurs that are actually doing that work on the frontline.

The third thing is we felt passionately that we needed to remain neutral, that we shouldn't be biased by any type of religious or political sides. What we should be doing is really going out there and finding the best places we, as an organization, can make a difference, and where there are entrepreneurial approaches that will really make a difference. So, we are not specifically focused just on one issue, but more focused on those sustainable solutions.

And the fourth thing—which links very much back to the brand—our fourth principle is really all about going out and challenging the norms. Historically, you have a lot of animosity between the social sector and the business sector. We're really turning that upside-down and building some really unlikely, fantastic partnerships amongst the business and social sector to drive change.

I think the fifth one, which is something that is historically always in Virgin, is that we didn't want people to feel like they were forced to get involved. We wanted to make it a lot of fun for them and very easy for them to get involved and engaged.

So that's, again, something fundamental—that we try to look at everything in a positive way and a fun way and, make it really simple for people to do things.

### **How Is the Virgin Culture Created and Sustained?**

**Joe:** I guess if there's a way to describe how that culture is created and exists within Virgin, and in Richard in general, it's that he mixes with so many different types of people, and it just flows...it just works. And that seems to be the whole culture, the whole organization of Virgin.

Just as an example, in the airline industry—let's take the airline industry here in America—I think their slogan, which I got from my good friend Dan Sullivan, is, "We're not happy until you're not happy." Flying is just a miserable sort of thing, in most cases.



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When I first flew Virgin, it was a completely different sort of environment. And that just seems to be this fun, exciting sort of company.

The reason I say that is because of what the people who worked on the airlines had to say. Everyone around there was very positive and was saying very nice things about the company.

I think when your team, your staff and your employees are touting how wonderful the organization they work for is, that's very telling, aside from just having a good experience as a client or a customer.

How does that happen? How is that created?

**Jean:** I think it comes from Richard. He really inspires in everyone that you shouldn't come to work feeling like it's a tedious chore. You should come to work because you love it and you want to be with a group of people that you really respect and enjoy working with.

And I think what he did really successfully in every business that he started, is go out there and find people to run the organizations, and then really let them get on with it. Then, he inspired those people to have fun with it and empowered those people to have fun with it and come up with great ideas. I think that's one of the reasons why Richard is so inspiring to all of us; he's so entrepreneurial that at every turn he encourages people to think of a different way to look at things, a new way to look at things.

And that, in its own right, just keeps it so exciting, constantly. But he always has fun with it and he's always a bit cheeky. I think that's, again, something that goes throughout the whole Virgin brand and throughout the whole company.

I can remember when I first started with the Virgin Group, I expected there to be a whole floor full of brand people that would keep the brand consistent, because it is such a powerful brand. What you soon find out is that there's not. There are only a few people, actually, in the center of the brand team. But what he's done really magnificently is build that magic throughout every single company, so all of the employees feel proud to be part of that Virgin Group.



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With Unite, we've tried to do the same thing. Historically, when you think of the word "charity," this miserable image comes to mind where you're thinking of licking stamps or of wanting to volunteer with one. I think there's a real opportunity—and there are a lot of fantastic charities that are out there now, really leading the way on this also—to change that whole mentality, so that people can realize that getting involved in and helping drive social and environmental issues can be really exciting and really fun. And some of the people who are at the forefront of this, on the frontlines, are just incredible individuals that we can all learn amazing amounts from.

### **How Does Virgin Unite Differ From Other Charities?**

**Joe:** Yeah, I agree. Wonderful. Well, let me talk about something you just mentioned: Virgin doing things differently.

The first sentence on Virgin Unite's home page, I have it written here, is, "Getting involved and doing things differently, it's always been the Virgin way."

How does Virgin Unite differ from other charities in general, to use that word, "charity?"

**Jean:** It's interesting. We have a lot of debates about that word because we are a charity in terms of being registered as a charity. But we're in a very fortunate position in that Richard and the Virgin Group pick up all of our overhead, which allows us to be kind of a neutral organization.

I think the way we have really approached things differently, first and foremost, is everything we do as an organization, we look at very much from a business perspective. We always focus on how there is going to be sustainability, so that whatever project work we do is not dependent on that ongoing charitable dollar. I think that's probably the first thing.

The second thing is that we didn't want it to be an add-on to a company. We didn't want it to be a foundation that sat outside an organization. We wanted it to really, truly be at the core and the heart of



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the Virgin Group.

So, every single person in the Group and the customers that we touch had the ability and were empowered to really become a social entrepreneur themselves. So, again, we didn't want it to be that add-on and something separate.

I think, thirdly, how we do it differently is that we really are very, very aware that we're not the experts in this area, so we go out and we find the best-of-the-best social entrepreneurs around the world to partner with. They just add so much inspiration into what we're doing.

I think, lastly, it just goes to what we were just talking about in that we always try to add a bit of fun and get people involved. Like when we take people out to Africa on what we call "wake-up trips." We don't take them just to the negative sides and the issue sides, but we take them to the inspiration side of Africa. There are some fantastic young people, some amazing things happening on the ground, so the entrepreneurs can get that realization, have fun, and really celebrate and enjoy the beauty of Africa, particularly with this next young generation right now.

**Joe:** I think that's critical to also see any sort of inspiration. Because if you don't have the hope and see that there's a possibility for something better, you're not always very motivated to believe that something can be done.

So, to show anyone involved the good side of what could happen when we actually help fix a social ill or help any people in any area have a bigger future, that becomes such a great thing.

### **How Does Virgin's Personality Carry Over Into Virgin Unite?**

I want to go a little deeper with the whole concept of Virgin being fun and exciting and all of that. The Virgin Group, the parent company, is obviously really well known for being loose, fun, and very edgy. How do you actually carry that personality over into Virgin Unite's operations, since you're dealing with probably some very critical issues at times, and



*We don't necessarily focus on the the issue itself, but on the solutions to that issue.*

**Jean:**

some very sad situations, and also some very inspiring situations? How do you keep it so loose and fun and edgy?

I know that Richard just has that personality, but what physically happens with the whole team to kind of keep it that way?

I think the first thing is just on getting the basics right. We try to keep our communications really fun and light and engaging.

If you look at the campaign that we launched within the UK, it was all about spending some time with your better side. We built a whole campaign around the seven deadly sins, so that you saw the sins and then the counterpart of that sin. It engaged people with the organizations that we were working with.

So again, it was a fun way to draw people in, rather than something very serious that just showed the negative context of it.

I think that's one of the first elements, just getting that communication message right. And I think we tend to always focus on the positive side as well; not necessarily focus on the issue itself, but on the solutions to that issue. Because there's such great stuff happening out there, it's highlighting that positive story and getting people inspired by it. Rather than in today's society, where I think we're all bogged down with so much negativity that it almost becomes overwhelming to people who think they can't do anything.

What we've tried to do at Virgin Unite, using that Virgin simplicity, is try to make things as clear as possible, as simple as possible and, very importantly, as easy as possible to get engaged.

I think that's a big part of it. The other thing that, I think, runs the thread through Virgin is kind of that whole rock and roll heritage, that music side of the brand. We felt passionately that at Unite we wanted to use that element of the brand to really, again, help engage people out there with issues and, again, have a bit of fun at the same time.

So, we actually started up what we call our "Music Movement Program." We work with a select number of artists who are really, really passionate about getting behind an issue, and don't want to do something



*Is there a specific program that you are particularly proud of?*

just for one off event, but instead want to make a 5-year commitment to something and really get behind an issue.

An example of that is Natalie Imbruglia, who focuses very, very much on a tough issue called Fistula, which is a birthing condition in northern Nigeria that impacts millions of young women.

Natalie has really, really gotten behind that issue. And she's done it, again, not in a horrible, depressing way by saying, "Oh my gosh! Isn't this issue horrible?" She's gotten behind it and used music to really bring people in and get them to understand that there are some really simple solutions to fixing the issue.

So, those are the kinds of things we try to do, again, to not focus on the negative side, but to focus on the positive side and, really, the opportunity to drive change.

**Joe:** The reason I ask that, too, is that I'd like all of the listeners to be able to take that whole concept and apply it to their own business. I think anything that a person can do to add meaning, fun and joy to something, the deeper and more impactful he or she becomes as a result of it.

Who are your most favorite and most annoying musicians that you've worked with? [Laugh] I'm joking, by the way. I don't want you to talk about any of the most annoying ones.

### **What Programs Are Jean Most Proud Of?**

Let me ask you about the programs that make up Virgin Unite. Is there a specific program that you are particularly proud of, that you think is just really amazing?

**Jean:** We've got lots of great stuff on the go right now. We just launched a really exciting, new clinic in South Africa. It kind of takes the model, again, where we charge for basic healthcare services in a very rural area—for what people can afford—and then we give away free HIV, TB and malaria care.



What's  
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of a social  
entrepreneur?

That's a perfect example of a model that can be sustainable. And how we created that was we found just an amazing social entrepreneur on the ground in South Africa, a chap called Hugo Templeman, who had started a clinic outside of Victoria, which he had seriously remodeled.

What he did, then, is he went and worked with the community to start small businesses. So, he's got a diaper manufacturer; he's got a car wash; he's got a bakery; he's got a health center. And that's just really helped uplift the whole community, as well as the clinic.

So, we've worked with him, as well as with Anglo Cole and the US government, to build this clinic outside of a very rural area called Sabi Sands. It's going to serve about 100,000 people.

That's an example of a great project that Richard was just out a few weeks ago to kick off in South Africa. So, that's one example.

Another one is we have a campaign called "Heaven's Angels." When we started looking at the whole issue of HIV, AIDS, malaria and TB, we found that one of the biggest missing gaps was rural transport. Once stuff gets into the country, how do you then get it out to the people in very remote, rural villages? There was a big gap there.

We found a fantastic, again, social entrepreneur organization called "Riders For Health," with a lovely couple called Barry and Andrea, who have run it themselves for fifteen years now. So, we partnered with them, trying to build a slightly different model, where someone from the village actually owns a bike and pays the loan back for the bike. They do healthcare delivery, like bed nets and basic medication, for three to four days a week. Then the rest of the week they use that bike for entrepreneurial activity, to generate their own funds.

Again, the whole project becomes self-sustainable. So it's just a great way to build rural transport and healthcare delivery, but then totally uplift the communities as well.

That's just starting to kick off right now, in Nigeria and probably Kenya as well.

**Jean's Definition of "Social Entrepreneur"**



*They have to have a passion for getting rid of inequity in the world.*

**Joe:** Wow! Wow! Wonderful. Can you do me a favor? Can you define social entrepreneur? What's your definition of a social entrepreneur?

**Jean:** It's someone on the frontlines, that has a brilliant idea for something that will be scalable, to drive significant social and environmental change.

Someone that comes up with a simple concept, like the "Riders For Health" (the workers on the motorbike). Or, there's this amazing guy in South Africa who came up with a university where the students actually run the university. He has companies like KP&G and other organizations pay for the coursework and the teachers; it becomes self-sustainable.

So just a great idea like that, that usually is very, very simple but has the opportunity that—if you've really got resources behind it and help them build their model—it can become very scalable and drive significant social or environmental change. We try to focus on the social entrepreneurs that have solutions that could be built into business models.

But there are great ones out there, too, that have more philanthropic models.

**Joe:** Right. What do you think, in your experience, are some of the motivations for these individuals? Clearly, there are a lot of people out there that could do things solely for making a lot of money and stuff...and many entrepreneurs do. Obviously, money is a necessary thing for effecting change, but it needs that entrepreneurial brain in order to best allocate resources and talents and organize it and really make something happen.

These are fabulous people that come up with these very unique models and go out and just put blood, sweat and tears into making something happen to help people and help causes. What are some of the characteristics that you see in individuals like that, that are needed in order for someone to be just a very effective social entrepreneur?

**Jean:** I think, firstly, they have to have a passion for getting rid of inequity in the world. I think that's one of the fundamental baselines, a passion for the



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issue that they're really, really focusing on. I think they have to be so selfless and so driven because, as you mentioned, they're not going to get benefits, like financial benefits or other benefits that you get in the corporate sector. So, they have to truly be driven and very selfless in their motives.

To bring that to life, there's an example of a guy who set up the first free university in South Africa. His name is Teddy Bletcher. He was working for a very large consulting company and had an opportunity to leave South Africa and make millions of dollars in his next job. He was working the finance sector as a venture capitalist.

He was at the airport, about to leave South Africa, and felt so passionately that he would be abandoning his country by not trying to help bring it to this next level, that he actually ripped up his ticket to leave. He got a fax machine and negotiated a building from another company, called Invest Tech, to start this free university. He then went out and found students.

This was about five years ago that he started this. He's probably one of the most incredibly driven people in the world, but his whole focus, his whole being is focused on how he can get these young people a better chance in life and give them a choice and an option in life.

The best social entrepreneurs that we've found to work with have really been those that aren't there to give handouts to people, they're there to give people choices and a voice in life. They can see the opportunities that, if you can do that, you can radically change that inequity in the world.

**Joe:** That's one of the things that initially inspired me to really research Virgin Unite and to interview you and see what you guys are actually doing. Starting with just the entrepreneur programs—which I'll ask you about in a little bit here—in Africa, what you're doing is you're enabling people. You're making them more capable. You're not just, "Here's money; here's food." You do that in areas where it needs to be done. Simultaneously, the



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goal is to empower people, so that they can actually create a better life and a better situation for themselves, because that's the only way it's long-term and sustainable.

### **How Does Virgin Unite Locate Social Entrepreneurs?**

**Joe:** How do you actually locate these social entrepreneurs? You obviously have a lot of partnerships and you're finding all kinds of great people. Is there a process of how you go about locating them?

**Jean:** There's a number of different ways. There are some great organizations out there, like Ashoka, Schwab Foundation, and Skoll Foundation, which have programs that help identify some of these people. So, we work with them as partners quite a bit.

We also go on the ground in Africa and just speak to lots and lots of people. A lot of the ones that are just up and coming, you won't hear about through some of the networks yet. So we tend to, again, get on the ground and talk to the people on the frontline; talk to them about their ideas. That's another route.

And I think the third route—one of the beauties of being part of the Virgin Group—is that people tend to send us ideas. Lots and lots.

An example of that is we had this one chap in South Africa who was from one of the townships. He saw this massive gap because there are no health centers in any of the townships. There are millions of people in these townships who had no way to work out, something from the health perspective, the fitness perspective. So he kept on, again and again, sending Richard and Virgin Active letters saying, "I want to start up a health club in BC Township!"

So, Virgin Active and Richard decided that they would give this guy an opportunity. They provided him with the equipment, and he found an unused, old disco. They renovated the disco, and they've now turned it into a magnificent gym. It's now serving a huge population in one of the largest townships in South Africa.



*There's loads of stuff happening... to empower staff to use their skills.*

So it's, again, finding those good ideas and, I think, finding the people that you know will take those ideas to the next level, and then just trusting them to let them get on with it.

### Examples of Volunteers

**Joe:** I will ask you later on in the interview, how people that listen to this interview—that are social entrepreneurs or anyone that wants to be involved—how they would actually contact you guys if they did want to get involved in some degree, way, shape or form, be it as simple as volunteering to literally donating resources, time, money, or whatever, in order to do that. I think the more the merrier. That's what's going to make the world go around.

Let me ask you about the volunteers, the people that are actually on the frontlines. Share some examples of how the volunteers and the funds actually specifically make a difference.

**Jean:** One of the things we started out with is trying to empower our staff to be volunteers and use their skills to get engaged and involved. So, there's loads of stuff happening, at a very grass-roots level across the Group, to empower staff to use their skills.

An example is in the US, we partnered with a fantastic organization called "Stand Up For Kids" that was started by a guy called Rick, who felt passionately that there shouldn't be homeless young people on the streets in the US. He set up a program that is now in, I think, over thirty-nine states, and he runs it all by volunteers. There are only, like, five staff members. His team and his volunteers go out and work on the streets with young homeless kids to try to help get them off the street.

From a Virgin perspective, Virgin Mobile in the States, for example, has really, really gotten behind "Stand Up For Kids." And their staff do loads of things to get engaged and involved, whether that be going to help renovate flats, so that the kids can move into those homes, or coming up with really cool ideas of how we can use their products.



*We tend to get as much out of it as the organization.*

Like, one thing that's happening right now with Virgin Mobile and the other carriers in the States, if you text "karma" on the phone, then American Eagle (who they've partnered up with) will provide free clothing for these kids on the streets. Virgin Mobile has also helped set up phones for the volunteers on the streets, so that when they meet a kid that may need help, they can call on a hotline. They set up a hotline, so they can call and get advice.

So, they've tried to weave it into their product as well, to support these organizations like "Stand Up For Kids."

We recently, like the US staff from Virgin Mobile, really wanted to understand better what it's like to be homeless. So the managing director as well as the staff of the organization literally spent forty-eight hours on the street without any money. They had to beg for food, etc., just to really understand what was happening.

The important thing on the volunteering side to remember is we tend to get as much out of it as the organization, because our staff then develops and learns as well, on top of that. So, the partners really help us in that sense.

I think where the social sector felt strongly we could add value as a group was in leveraging our marketing skills. So we sent in hit squads, for example, marketing hit squads into the partners that we work with, where they work with them for a week to help them establish their marketing plan. Then they'll work on going, for example, to help establish a website or a fundraising plan, and help run events with them.

So it happens on all levels, all different levels across the organizations.

**Joe:** I love that, marketing hit squads. That's great. Me, my whole world is marketing and promotions. And part of this here, doing this interview, my objective is to create an education-based marketing tool about Virgin Unite. So in my own small way I can actually make people aware of this organization, what you guys are doing and how it actually helps. I want to get the word out there, because that's such an integral part.



Can you actually train someone to be an entrepreneur, Joe: or is it naturally inherent in people?

There are so many great, wonderful people doing wonderful things. It's just finding out who they are and having people become aware of it. And what's so wonderful about what you guys are doing is just your big facilitation of all of these people that are effecting change.

### Virgin Unite's Entrepreneurial Programs

One of my favorite things, and this is what I was most fascinated by with my dinner with Richard, is when he talked about what he was doing for the School of Entrepreneurship in Africa.

If you could, I'd like you to talk a bit about the entrepreneurship programs that are being implemented. The School of Entrepreneurship in Africa, tell us a bit about that. And then there's also another program that utilizes entrepreneurs locally, different ages and skill sets, to make a difference. If you could, explain how this works.

**Jean:** What we've found in South Africa, in talking to people on the ground and in talking to a lot of young people, is that one thing that was missing when they grew up in their township or rural area was role models for starting up businesses—successful entrepreneurs.

We worked with, again, this guy Teddy Bletcher (who I mentioned started SETA), and asked ourselves, "How can we start up a university that helps build that entrepreneurial spirit and really breaks new ground?" But I guess the even bigger question when we first began was, "Can you actually train someone to be an entrepreneur or is it naturally inherent in people?"

What we found was, again working with Teddy, that we had a program where when the students started SETA, which is the core university program, we provide them with very small loans of \$20 to \$50. Each student has to build a little business on that. As they progress through their years at the university, they build a business plan and transfer into an arm of the university that we've built, called the Branson School of Entrepreneurship.



*It's a spirit inside someone, such that everything they see, they look at as an opportunity.*

What that's all about, really, is finding those young people within the track of the university that have that start of an entrepreneurial spirit. Then we help really grow that inside them and mentor them to build that business plan and help them hook up with other entrepreneurs around the world.

Once they enter into the School of Entrepreneurship, as a next step, we help incubate their business. We incubate thirty businesses at a time. We set it up so they have to set up just as they would in any business; set up a budget, pay for their phone calls, etc. Then we help them build their marketing plan, their business plan, and help them learn how to handle their financial situation. Then after a period of eighteen months of incubation, we've raised a seed fund that can help them start their businesses.

The exciting thing about the seed fund is that it was actually created by a group of external, very successful entrepreneurs from the UK, who really, really, really wanted to get involved in the frontline, but didn't know how to do that.

So, they have each paid anywhere in the realm of 120,000£ upward to join us on a trip to Africa, to learn more about the issues. All of that money goes into the seed fund to help the young people start their businesses. Those entrepreneurs themselves will get very involved in helping mentor these young people as they go through the course of starting their business.

### **Jean's Personal Definition of "Entrepreneur"**

**Joe:** Wow! That's awesome. How would you define an entrepreneur? What's Jean's personal definition of an entrepreneur?

**Jean:** That's a very interesting question. We've been debating a lot about the link back to the question of, "Can you train someone to be an entrepreneur?"

Fundamentally, if you look at Richard as an example, it's a spirit



*“How can I scale that up to something that’s going to be very large and make that happen?”*

inside someone that every single thing they see, they look at as an opportunity, rather than any type of negative twist on it. And they look at it through a whole different lens. They look at it, again, from a perspective, again a very positive perspective, of how can you take that and scale it up or take a different approach, do it differently.

So I think that their mind is constantly buzzing with concepts and ideas. You can see that when we do wakeup trips with entrepreneurs (success entrepreneurs in the US and the UK) out to South Africa. You can see as soon as they land, their mind starts buzzing, “How can I help that person, who’s making beads for five small shops, scale up and start selling them through Bloomingdale’s in the States?”

Their mind goes from a very small opportunity to, again, “How can I scale that up to something that’s going to be very large and make that happen?”

It’s harder to describe that incredibly inspiring spirit that they have, where they’re able to bring other people along with them. They get other people enthused and engaged, and they make their idea happen. And they never let go of it.

I think the entrepreneurs I’ve seen that have been the most successful are just so incredibly persistent and so passionate about their idea, that no matter how many times they get knocked, they still continue to fight with it.

That’s what we see in a lot of these young people, in South Africa in particular; they’ve gone through such a difficult time in their life. Most of them come from incredible poverty, where they have had to beg for money. Most of them have had to go in the streets to find other ways to get money, so they can feed their family. A lot of them, again, have been orphaned because of AIDS. They’ve gone through such a difficult situation in their younger years that they’ve almost built up this incredible resistance, and I guess persistence, in wanting to make a better life for themselves.

What we’re finding as they progress through the school is if we can help them expand their ideas, the kernel of an idea that they have, they are



*“If something can be done, I’m going to try to do it.”*

fantastic at making sure they push that forward and make it happen. They already have that built-in kind of power in themselves to make them want to win.

**Joe:** That is actually a fabulous definition. You said so many very useful things there. I would recommend everyone listening, even if you have to, go back and listen to that definition again, because I thought it was fabulous, just talking about the passion and the optimism and stuff.

When I was talking with Richard about global warming and his contributions to global warming, one of the things I said was, “Really, what if you have all of these people out here who are saying you can’t do anything about it and nothing can be done (and there are always those sorts of naysayers in any situation), what’s the motivation?” And he’s like, “Well, I’m an optimist. If something can be done, I’m going to try to do it.”

I think that’s so critical, as you described it, looking through the lens and seeing opportunities instead of just problems, and seeing every problem as having a possibility. You may not solve it entirely, but you certainly can improve it.

Without that mindset, nothing gets done. And these individuals, entrepreneurs, have that.

My very good friend and a very smart guy by the name of Dan Sullivan actually taught me where the original term “entrepreneur” was first used. A guy by the name of Jon-Baptiste Say coined the term in the 1800s, and described it as an individual that takes resources from a lower level of productivity to a higher level of productivity.

The way that I look at entrepreneurship is any area where you’re just taking resources from one place and improving it and making it better, even if it’s significant or just a little bit. That’s entrepreneurship and that’s entrepreneurial thinking. And that can be done in so many areas, not just in business. There are so many people that do nothing for money; however, they create so much positive change and value in the world. Very cool. So, thank you for describing that.



We feel  
passionate  
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world...

Jean:

### “Good Investments” Program

You mentioned “Good Investments” earlier. Can you talk a bit about the “Good Investments” program, how it’s creating opportunities around the world, and what it is specifically?

That part of it is really led by the businesses and by Richard across the Group. Virgin Unite just helps really inspire and connect people to ideas.

I guess what we feel passionate about is driving large-scale change in the world, both from a social perspective and a mental perspective.

The best way to do that is to get businesses behind looking at opportunities to drive profitable businesses that will drive that change. Then, it becomes something that’s sustainable and not dependent on the charitable dollar, which is very dependent on how well a business is doing, etc., and can dry up.

So “Good Investments” to us are great business opportunities that are out there and, again, will have huge change associated with them.

An example in the Virgin Group is bio fuels. A few years ago, the Group was looking at all different kinds of opportunities in that area—oil refineries, etc. Richard, when he got very passionate about climate change and bio fuels, realized that this is a great opportunity to make some significant investments, which will drive really positive outcomes from an environmental perspective.

So, we try to look at those wherever we operate. In Africa, they take on a very different face than they may in other countries. Virgin Atlanta, for example, launched Virgin Nigeria, which is an airline that will build up across Western Africa to provide much-needed transport between countries there. Obviously a lot of jobs have already been created with Virgin Nigeria.

In South Africa, there are huge opportunities for rural communications and rural banking, linked to Virgin Money and Virgin Mobile. The “Good Investments” across the Group are allowed to take the



shape of expanding current focus within the business or setting up a whole new business, like what we did with bio fuels.

You'll see a lot more exciting stuff coming out from the Group in that area. Again, that really comes from the entrepreneurial spirit across the Group, from our different managing directors, from Virgin management itself—they have a great business development team—and very, very, very much so from Richard. He's really passionate about moving his entrepreneurial spirit now to look at how he can really do what he does best, which is launching successful businesses that drive significant change.

### **What Is Richard Branson's Leadership Style?**

**Joe:** Just a personal question about Richard. What sort of leadership form does he take? He obviously is a wonderful delegator, and is able to take his passion and his ideas and instill that same hope and belief in other people, who just take it on.

As an organization, how many people are employed by or work directly with all of the Virgin companies? How many individuals are we talking about?

**Jean:** With the new merger in the UK, about over 40,000, probably 50,000 now globally.

**Joe:** Gotcha. I'm more interested for people listening that are entrepreneurs, thinking to themselves, "How does this grow?" What are some of Richard's philosophies on growing an organization?

Is there anything you can speak to on that, which would give some insight into Richard's leadership? He's done such a wonderful job of going into so many areas and having success.

Some people will say, "If you're focused on multiple things, you're never going to get anything off the ground." However, he has the ability. Obviously, Richard's had some major setbacks and failures as does any



*He always makes time for people.*

entrepreneur, but he's come out on top and he's done such a wonderful job. It's just growing and it's bigger, and he's got thousands of people that are supporting this.

What sort of leadership characteristics does Richard possess that other people listening to this interview could learn from?

**Jean:** I think, first and foremost, he has an incredible focus on people. He always makes time for people. He doesn't care if you're the MD of an organization or you're working the call center. He makes time for everyone across the entire Group, and really empowers people and lets them get on with it. But he's there if you need him.

I think that's a very special trait of Richard's. He's wonderful with people.

I think the second thing is he has a real fantastic eye for seeing where something needs to be turned upside-down and an opportunity for Virgin to do that. That's where the brand and Richard do their best, when he goes into a market or an area that needs to be totally radically changed. You can see that with the airline; you can see that with mobile communications. That's what we're trying to do right now with Virgin Unite as well.

Anywhere that needs to be changed, that's where his leadership is the strongest.

I think, thirdly, he's not afraid to take risks at all. He will take the risk. He'll go in and he will try to make a difference, and he's not afraid to fail. And I think that's really important. And he instills that in his people. It's not a blame culture. We embrace successes and we learn from our failures. I think that's a really important characteristic of his leadership style.

Lastly, I think he has an incredible ability to look at things from a whole, very unique perspective. I can't tell you how many times I went to him with what I thought was a great idea, and he'll just kind of sit and say, "Hmm, not so sure about that," but he'll let me do it anyway. And in the end, he was right.



*“I want to leave people in a good place, and I want to be a positive influence.”*

He just has an amazing, innate ability to know when something’s a good idea and when it’s going to work. We always learn from that with him.

**Joe:** From the time I spent with him, I just do not see any ego in that guy at all. I’ve met a lot of very powerful, very influential and very wealthy people. Just from the get-go, the energy about Richard when he first showed up—we were a small group of people—and the first thing out of his mouth was, “Hello! How can I help you guys?”

I just thought it was the coolest thing. That whole attitude of, “I want to leave people in a good place, and I want to be a positive influence.” That was my perspective on him. That’s what I think is such an interesting thing about Virgin in general. It just seems to have that attitude. Everyone I’ve ever come across in the Virgin company just seems to have a good attitude. And that, I believe, is definitely instilled from the top. It’s a leadership sort of thing that goes downward.

### **How Does Virgin Unite Develop and Maintain Partnerships?**

You have a lot of partnerships, clearly, with all kinds of different people. So your success, Virgin Unite success, hinges on global partnerships. I’d like to ask you a little bit more about how Virgin develops and maintains these strategic relationships with charities, businesses entrepreneurs, and the different celebrities you work with. How does that happen?

**Jean:** Firstly, we tend to focus on partnering with organizations that have a similar philosophy to us, which makes it a lot easier to get the partnership and relationship working.

We always are very aware that we’re not the experts in this area, so we go out and we seek the experts, and we seek the best-of-the-best, which may be organizations on the frontline. The whole social sector is radically changing right now. I think there are a lot of businesses and a lot



People  
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really  
opened  
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arms to  
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together.

of organizations and GOs and charities that are all much more willing to work together and partner together.

We go out and we really search for those organizations that have that same philosophy and have that realization that both groups have different skill sets to bring to the table and you both need to respect those different skill sets.

You come out with some very unlikely partnerships in the end, which can be really successful in helping to drive change.

I think Richard is obviously very important in that partnership side of helping bring organizations in to work with us and reach out. His heritage in the music industry has been fantastic because the Virgin brand and the Virgin name has allowed us to bring onboard some great musicians that really want to drive change and are really sincere.

I think that's fundamentally one of the things, when we look at partners, that we're very focused on. That is, organizations that have the same philosophy of wanting to give the people that we're working with a voice and wanting to give them an opportunity in life. Again, the focus is not in handouts but in giving them an opportunity to change their own life. Those are the kind of organizations we search out.

**Joe:** Also, you get to go and probably hang out with some really cool people and party all the time. Right?

**Jean:** That's the fun side of it, absolutely.

### What Are Virgin Unite's Obstacles To Progress?

**Joe:** Man, that's funny. This might be an interesting question, but what are some of Virgin Unite's biggest obstacles to progress, if there are any that you can think of?

**Jean:** When we first began, it was unwillingness of organizations to partner with businesses in the social sector. As I mentioned, that barrier has really been



*You have to make sure you focus on the things that are going to have maximum impact.*

knocked down and that obstacle's been knocked down a lot in the last three years. People have really opened their arms to want to work together.

In the beginning, I think we were focusing on working with all different kinds of partners, larger scale and smaller scale. What we've found now is that we work best with ones that, again, have that similar philosophy of wanting to move quickly and wanting to drive change, and ones that are very entrepreneurial. Those are the ones we tend to search out.

So, I think we've really overcome that obstacle, which we probably had in the start.

I think the second obstacle is probably one of too many opportunities. I think both with myself and with Richard, we just see so many opportunities to drive change out there. We constantly have to pull ourselves back and make sure that we remain focused, so that we can deliver on some really big things. I think that's probably going to always be the biggest difficulty we have as a Group, is how you make sure you focus on the things that are going to have maximum impact.

### **How Do Entrepreneurs Focus Their Efforts?**

**Joe:** What sort of advice or suggestions would you give to entrepreneurs in general in that area? That, I think, is one of the double-edged swords of being an entrepreneur: you have the ability to make so much positive change and create and innovate and do so many things. On the flipside, part of that drive puts many entrepreneurs into their eyes, for the opportunities are much bigger than their stomach's ability to assimilate and digest them all.

Any advice or suggestions on how you go about filtering all of these different options and choices and things that come your way, so you really, at the end of the day, can move forward effectively and make a difference in focus?



*We surround ourselves with people that have the ability to make sure we're measuring our outputs.*

**Jean:** Yeah. That's definitely been an interesting journey for both Richard and me in this area. And I think what we've found is we've spent a lot of time with experts in the social sector and the environmental sector and people on the frontline. Just listening, I think, has been the most important. Listening to them on what the biggest issues are that need to be changed, and listening to some of their ideas on how they can change, and focusing in on those things rather than trying to be all things to all people.

I think that has helped us a lot. Again, listening to those experts and primarily those people that are experiencing it first-hand has helped us narrow down what the big issues, what the big opportunities are that we should be focusing on.

I think also what we do is surround ourselves with people that have the ability to make sure we're measuring our outputs. We're measuring what the impact is in the social sector and the environmental sector, so that we can constantly go back and look at what we have been doing. That allows us to say, "Okay, that hasn't been making that much of a difference, let's stop that and focus on the areas that we know can make a significant difference."

I think it's constantly going back and doing those measurements, as well.

In saying that, though, we have a philosophy that if there's something that comes up that we can see is going to radically drive change in the world, rather than say, "No, that's out of our focus," we make sure that we get the resources to make that happen. Very often, we spin it out of the organization, so it becomes its own independent organization.

And we've done that and we will do that several times in the coming years, of helping set things up and then spin them off so we can, again, move on to that next idea.

**Joe:** Right. My basic takeaway out of what you just said is to surround yourself with talented and resourceful people, and just be resourceful in



*There are  
so many  
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but don't  
know how...*

general. You certainly are. The whole organization is just very, very resourceful.

### **What Is On The Horizon For Virgin Unite?**

Well, let's talk about a couple more things I want to ask you.

What's on the horizon for Virgin Unite? What's Virgin Unite going to look like in future years ahead, or as long out as you want to discuss?

**Jean:**

Firstly, in the coming years, as I mentioned before, we've got a lot of great projects that are happening right now, with the clinic, the "Riders For Health" work that we're doing with them as partners, and the Branson School of Entrepreneurship. We really want to focus on making sure that we get those right.

What we'd love to see over the coming years is working with other partners to really help expand those ops, so they can make a much larger-scale impact across Africa. That would be a big focus for us.

The "Good Investments" category is going to be a massive focus for the company. I'll just say watch this space because there are some very exciting things coming up across the Virgin Group in that area.

And then, I think the third thing we really want to do, ultimately, over the next few years, is create this movement of action where we can connect as many people as possible to these great grassroots entrepreneurs, so they can really leverage the assets they have, whether that be their time, their cash, their stuff or their voice, to really help them make a difference in the world.

I think there's an incredible opportunity there, because I think right now in the world, there are so many people that want to do something, but don't know how or don't know who to do that something with.

If we can just do that simple facilitation and connection point, and let people drive change themselves, I think there's a wonderful opportunity in the world for that.



We very,  
very  
much  
welcome  
people to  
send us  
ideas...

### How Can Someone Get Involved?

**Joe:** Wonderful. Wonderful. For all of the listeners and people that now have a much better understanding of what Virgin Unite is and what it does, how can the listeners get more information on Virgin Unite? And how can someone get involved, from social entrepreneurs to just people in general that would like to volunteer or do anything to participate?

**Jean:** The best place for a starting point is probably our website, which is [www.VirginUnite.com](http://www.VirginUnite.com). Via that, you can volunteer and connect with some of these great grassroots organizations. And we very, very much welcome people to send ideas so we can, again, look at new ideas in the future and find some other great partners.

**Joe:** Wonderful. What I will say for all of my [www.GeniusNetwork.com](http://www.GeniusNetwork.com) subscribers is that I've had several people who compiled some really valuable information on Virgin Unite in preparation for my interview. I'll make that additional information about Virgin Unite available to the people that listen to this.

I want to thank Emily Main, Lisa Wagner and Eunice Miller, who have been instrumental in helping compile information for me.

### Famous Last Words

Jean, any famous last words? Anything we didn't cover in the interview that you think would be important for our listeners to hear?

**Jean:** I'll just say that we're, again, very excited to work with other partners, to really take this opportunity in the world right now to totally change the way the social and the business sector work together, and hopefully drive some good stuff.

**Joe:** Wonderful. Virgin is such a cool organization. I was so happy to do this



*Eat  
Your  
Competition  
Alive!*

interview. Thank you for taking the time to do this. I appreciate it, and I wish you guys, of course, the very best of success with this. You're doing really, really good stuff.

I'm happy to help and get the word out any way I can. I also recommend that the listeners please let me know if there's any more information that they'd like regarding this interview. And if it's something that a listener wants deeper conversations on, again, please let me know and I will make sure that I ask Jean and anyone else in the organization that can provide it.

So, Jean, thank you so much. Have yourself a wonderful day. And I want to wish the very best to all of our listeners.

**Jean:** Thank you, Joe, very much.

**Joe:** Hello, this is Joe Polish. I want to thank you for taking the time to listen to this interview. I hope you found it very useful. Please give me your feedback on all of the interviews that you listen to. I love to hear your feedback, so we can always deliver a great program for you.

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