



Ambition can trump experience

The benefits of hiring clever, driven people are well worth the effort

By Richard Branson

Q. You have advised entrepreneurs to hire to their weaknesses. I'm an idea guy, and I love being in front of an audience. I'm not a sales guy, nor a marketing guru, nor a finance wiz, so I do need to hire to those weaknesses. Once the right people are in place, how do I delegate responsibilities while retaining overall ownership of the business and my idea? I have no problem letting people succeed and gain recognition — I'm more concerned about coming into conflict with someone who thinks that they can do things better than I can. Also, how do I ramp up the business while protecting it from competitors who have money and know-how — say, someone who has been in business 50 years and grown hundreds of companies — squashing me like a bug and claiming my ideas as their own?
— Bill Hagen

A. As you work toward the launch of your business, keep two things in mind: The easiest part of being an entrepreneur is coming up with ideas; the hardest part is making those ideas become a reality. Why? The latter usually involves doing something you're not neces-

sarily good at — like building a website, for example, or producing an app or coming up with a strong marketing strategy. In my case, I had trouble with the financial side of things. I'm hopeless with spreadsheets and numbers, and I didn't completely understand the difference between net and gross until I was at least 50 years old!

That said, you must be wondering how Virgin managed to grow into a global brand that spans the telecommunications, health, fitness, hospitality and aviation sectors. Our team's secret is simple: We've always hired smart people. And we have found that the key to finding the right people to hire is to look for those who are energised by your passion, want to add to your ideas and aren't afraid to suggest ways to improve them.

Since I'm dyslexic, I learned how to work around my limits early on. As a student, I'd had to rely on classmates to help me study for tough exams; when I started my own business, I was quick to delegate. Great people have joined our organisation ever since then. Even the name "Virgin" was the result of a team effort. We were thinking about naming our records business "Slipped Disc" until a young woman jokingly pointed out we were all virgins — at business, that is.

While you might feel wary of conflict, hiring people who challenge your ideas will be good for business. You can't be right all of the time, so employees and colleagues who have the courage and good sense to voice their honest views will be valuable assets. We've made some mistakes at Virgin, but we would have made far more if I had been surrounded by "yes men". When you get your business up and running, it's likely that some people overseeing parts of your company will feel that they can do things better. But that's absolutely fine — you need people who have ideas. Listen to them, delegate to them, and trust them, otherwise they won't feel valued.

Some of your people may eventually go on to start their own companies, but this only means that you make good hires. It has happened a few times at Virgin: Adam Balon, who worked for Virgin Cola, went on to co-found Innocent Drinks; Rowan Gormley worked for a number of Virgin companies before setting up his own business, Orgasmic Wines, which we later bought when we were creating Virgin Wines. Their successes remind our competitors that for every great person who's left Virgin, we have many more on staff.

It's true that if your business is

based on a great idea and ends up threatening to disrupt an industry, it's likely that an established player will try to copy you or put you out of business. This has happened to Virgin a number of times. When we launched Virgin Atlantic, for instance, British Airways subjected us to years of intimidation, which included the company trying to poach our passengers and leaking anti-Atlantic stories to the press. This so-called "dirty-tricks campaign" ended in a lawsuit that cost British Airways £3mil (RM16.8bil).

How did we survive? We used our small size to our advantage. We were nimble and took advantage of spur-of-the-moment opportunities for publicity. We also made the most of new technologies — Virgin Atlantic was the first airline to introduce seatback entertainment and we were the first to have a bar in the sky.

These days, nearly every airline has these features, and we keep striving to find new ways to innovate.

It's important to keep in mind that your established competitors may have money, but it's unlikely that they can swiftly adjust course. An entrepreneur with a few expert employees and loads of ambition can disrupt any industry. — **distributed by The New York Times Syndicate**



Questions from readers will be answered in future columns. Please send them to RichardBranson@nytimes.com. Please include your name, country, email address and the name of the website or publication where you read the column.



Sir Richard Charles Nicholas Branson is founder of the Virgin Group. He became an entrepreneur at 16 and made his first million at the age of 25.