

# EXCITE, AND STAY EXCITING

Once your company is well established, keeping your employees engaged in their work can be tough, especially those who took the job because they were intrigued by the excitement and the challenges presented by the launch stage. Most of your best people will always be interested in developing their skills further, but they may find fewer new projects available, along with fewer paths to advancement. Working with employees to find solutions will be the job of every manager on your team.

I love tackling new challenges, and our team at Virgin does, too, so as we expanded into new fields where we saw opportunities, we have always naturally expanded our skills. We launched our first Virgin business, Virgin Records, in 1972; one of the wonderful things about working here these days is the diversity of our companies all around the world. One day you might be a member of a team that is working on the launch of a new mobile phone network in Latin America or the Middle East, and the next week you could find yourself helping to develop one of our Branson centers for young entrepreneurs. I like to encourage all our employees to apply for jobs at other Virgin companies that they find interesting.

In recent years, a few Virgin companies have provoked more of a response from the public and our employees than others; we often refer to them as our “shot in the arm” companies. They show customers and employees what our business stands for, and often inspire our teams at other businesses to try new challenges.

The most obvious example is Virgin Galactic: Many people dream of going to space one day, myself included, so there was nothing more thrilling than starting up a business with the aim of making that dream a reality. Galactic gave a boost to the entire Virgin Group, creating a buzz among employees who were proud of the company. Virgin Galactic was partly the inspiration for Virgin Oceanic, our deep-sea exploration and tourism business—a company that will require all our best efforts, because ocean exploration is in many ways more difficult than space travel!

To be truly inspiring for employees, our shot-in-the-arm businesses must retain the core values of the rest of the company.

**COLUMN** Galactic Unite, a not-for-profit initiative that was launched earlier this year, is a good example. In partnership with Virgin Galactic and the Virgin Group’s philanthropic arm, Virgin Unite, the global community of future astronauts—who signed up for our space tourism flights—is working to promote future innovation in this field. Galactic Unite provides scholarships for selected female college students pursuing degrees in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Another way we keep our employees engaged is by inviting them to take part in company events, like the Virgin Mobile Live Freefest, a free music festival we hold every year to raise money (through donations) for homeless young people. Along with giving employees a chance to give something back to the community, the festival allows us to say thank you to our customers and staff by providing them with the chance to enjoy themselves for free. Our sense of fun unites our businesses—we love to let our hair down—and so this event reminds employees of what we stand for.

In some ways it’s easier for a large organization like Virgin to embark on such projects, but with a little inventiveness and resourceful thinking, small business owners might come up with shot-in-the-arm schemes of their own.

When I left school and embarked on my first real business adventure, Student Magazine, it was at times a real struggle to keep our small group motivated and make ends meet, though we didn’t want our readers to be aware of this. We wanted to present people with something exciting that they would want to pick up and read, but this seemed just about impossible when our living arrangements consisted of sleeping on mattresses in a friend’s parent’s basement.

Somehow I persuaded Mick Jagger to give us an interview, and that opened all sorts of doors for us since Mick Jagger hardly ever gave interviews. Jean-Paul Sartre, David Hockney and John Lennon all helped out with contributions. We soon found ourselves with an exciting proposition on our hands. Together, our energized team members built a terrific magazine that succeeded in reaching the audiences we wanted to connect with: young people like ourselves.

As you consider how to challenge and engage your employees, remember that it’s important to keep things exciting—after all, we spend so much of our lives working that to stay fresh and creative, we need to bring a sense of play and entertainment to the office. Your employees’ continuing enthusiasm will pay off as they stay on for the long term, build their skills, contribute their ideas, and take a real interest in the business.

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