

# Like a Virgin

## *Richard Branson—an ISFP?*

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*In Brisbane a small group of type enthusiasts met monthly during 2000 to discuss the personalities of selected people in the public arena. While appreciating that the only way to confirm type is from an inner understanding of the person, the evidence from biographies, autobiographies, newspapers, websites and personal contacts provide insights into the subjects' values and preferences. Those sources, combined with the lively group discussion, offer ample material for hypothesising the type preferences of the selected subjects.*

*The first cab off the rank—or first plane off the runway?—is Anne Russell's look at Richard Branson.*

The basic principles are that people matter and that small is beautiful. From there I would go on to say: shape the enterprise around the people; build businesses, do not buy them; be the best, not the biggest; capture every fleeting idea; drive for change; and, a very practical point, persuade the government of the merits of competition - that is slightly biased!

Branson at age 43, speech to the UK Institute of Directors (Branson, 1998, p.452)

Richard Branson's 1998 autobiography *Losing my Virginity* provides a perfect opportunity for type watchers to explore the development of type, as he presents an almost blow-by-blow insight into his life and beliefs from early childhood to age 43. What an amazing entrepreneur!

Sensing, feeling and perceiving preferences seem to be clear. However, in our discussion there was some disagreement as to whether he is energised through extraversion or introversion.

### **The feeling preference is always present**

When discussing his early years, Branson focuses on the interactions and love of his family:

I cannot remember a moment in my life when I have not felt the love of my family. We were a family that would have killed for each other—and we still are. My parents adored each other, and in my childhood there was barely a cross word between them.

(Branson, 1998, p.18)

Branson continues to carry his empathy for people with him in all Virgin enterprises. Every business he starts is initiated by his belief that people are not getting a fair deal from existing services and goods in the marketplace. A mail-order company provided records more cheaply for members of the public; an airline company was created when the service of other carriers did not live up to expectations.

Branson constantly shows empathy for his clients and employees. He insisted that Virgin pay £1.40

per share, the original purchase price, in a buyback at a time when the October 1987 crash had brought their price down to 70p. His philosophy was that “this meant that nobody who had invested in Virgin when it was floated ... would lose money” (p.253).

Branson seeks harmony almost at any cost. He has difficulty making any staff redundant unless they violate his core values. When British Airways spread negative rumours about Virgin and Branson, he wrote to Lord King, head of BA, because “I have always believed that personal relationships are vital in business and that people should be directly accountable for their actions” (p.321). King's short, impersonal or, in MBTI terminology, STJ response hit at the basis of Branson's feeling preference:

... it did not address me personally but only quoted a response he had made to a newspaper. It was as if he could not bring himself to address me as a person or even to acknowledge me. (p.322)

A key aspect of Virgin from the beginning was the importance of the employees being listened to and respected by management. There were frequent parties for all staff to ensure they mingled and got to know each other beyond the work environment.

Typical of Branson's behaviour was, when awarded £500 000 as personal compensation from British Airways, he distributed the money amongst the Virgin airline employees “since they had all had to suffer from the pressure which British Airways had put us under in the form of reduced salaries and cuts in their bonuses” (p.430).

Whenever Branson's personal values were discredited or violated it was like hitting a brick wall. There was a time when, while awaiting the arrival of a £6 million cheque, the Virgin Group sought to exceed its £3 million overdraft limit by £300 000. Notwithstanding the immediate prospect of funds that would put the firm £3 million into the black, their bank insisted they would bounce any cheques over the £3 million limit.

Branson reports dealing with the bank's account manager:

I rarely lose my temper—in fact I can count the times I have lost my temper on the fingers of one hand ... I felt my blood boil ... I took him by the arm, led him to the front door and pushed him outside ... and [returned and] collapsed on a sofa in tears of exhaustion, frustration and worry. (pp.204-208)

### Sensing over intuition?

The detail presented during the description of this episode with the account manager offers evidence of Branson's sensing function:

I looked across at this man in his blue pinstripe suit with his neat little black leather brief case ... he was standing there in his highly polished black oxford brogues. (p.208)

Branson may well have become a great sportsman: however, at an early age he damaged his knees and was unable to continue his beloved sporting activities which had already brought him numerous trophies. Later he discovered the sensate joys of ballooning and record-breaking boat trips across the Atlantic. Alongside the description of physical details which brought awareness of impending death, there are descriptions of the beauty of the surrounding nature.

Branson's love of viewing and being in touch with nature attests to his extraverted sensing function. He reflects:

Both the series of balloon flights and the numerous Virgin companies I have set up form a seamless series of challenges which I can date from my childhood. (p.12)

Myers (1998, p.6) says people who prefer sensing "are observant about the specifics of what is going on around them and are especially attuned to practical realities." Indeed, Branson's autobiography provides continual examples of detailed observations which suggest a sensing preference.

However, Branson's dyslexia and short-sightedness was unrecognised in his early school years, so he developed his intuitive abilities early. To accommodate his dyslexia he reports that "when someone sends me a written proposal, rather than dwelling on detailed facts and figures I find that my imagination grasps and expands on what I read" (p.29).

By his early forties Branson's intuition is well developed, as his philosophy has become clear in that "however tight things are, you still need to have the big picture at the forefront of your mind." He gives the example of being unable to raise US \$10 million to install individual seat-back videos in economy class seats: so he instead negotiated a US \$4 billion credit to purchase 18 new aircraft with personal videos for all seats.

### An extravert or an introvert energy?

In the mass media Branson is portrayed as an extravert who enjoys a good party and presents publicity for his companies. He is often in the front line, talking with the press and promoting Virgin's products and companies. The mass media love to capture his smiling face and describe images of unexpected action. On one such occasion he flew into Darling Harbour suspended beneath a helicopter to launch Virgin Mobile (Lill, 2000, p.14).

No doubt these activities stimulate his sense of fun and represent his extraverted sensing function; and perhaps at the same time enable him to avoid having to converse with unknown people as he arrives at a launch—the attention is directed away from him to the ensuing activities. Lill (p.14) reports:

The stunts were shameless grabs for publicity, for which Sir Richard gives no apology. "I think we've just about got through every costume in the costume shops. When I launch a new adventure, I try to keep it fun. We try to get on the front page rather than tucked away on the back pages", he said.

When Virgin Blue set up in Brisbane, Branson did not fly to Australia to celebrate: instead he allowed his Australian chief executive Brett Godfrey to live in that glory. Even so, the mass media portrayed Branson talking via a satellite television link with the Premier of Queensland, and did not give prime space to Godfrey.

The media make the most of a positive, charismatic personality apparently interacting with the outer world. In a known environment, or when discussing topics which are familiar or a passion, introverts do appear to extravert their energies. Generally the media capture those moments, and good action footage is presented.

In the early years Branson organised parties for all of his employees, recognising that people need to play together in order to work well together. His reasons for partying may well have been related more to his SFP preference for fun and for creating harmonious interpersonal relationships, than to a preference for extraversion.

From an early age Branson had just one best friend, and at school he found another special friend with whom he spent time and shared dreams and projects. He relied on both of those boyhood friends for advice and support in the early stages of his business ventures. When discussing key issues Branson tends to deal with just one or two well-known and trusted colleagues. He hands over responsibility for each newly created company, rather than taking the front running, whilst always being available to give support and inspiration.

An insightful article by Adam Higginbotham (2000, p.3) describes his experience of meeting Branson:

Branson is awkward and nervous. He hates doing interviews, he says. He finds it hard talking to people he doesn't know ... Later, when we sit down to talk, Branson is hopelessly inarticulate. He stares at the table and mumbles.

Branson's favourite place is Necker Island, the remotest of the Virgin Islands. There he can 'relax into being among people I love and care about' (Branson, 1998, p.449). The introvert is re-energised.

At school Branson spent much time in the library, as he was neither an academic nor able to play sport because of his knee injury, and therefore believed he was the potential butt of bullying (p.33). A key paragraph suggests he is an introvert who needs to work through his thoughts before expressing them:

Even now, whenever I am interviewed or have to give a speech, I feel the same trepidation and I have to overcome the same sense of shyness. If I'm talking on a subject that I know a little about, or that I feel passionately about, then I can be reasonably fluent. But, when I'm asked to talk about something I know very little about, I become extremely uncomfortable—and it shows ... I just try to give the truthful answer, and, if it takes a little time to work out that answer, I hope that people will trust a slow, hesitant response more than a rapid, glib one. (p.56)

There are no instances in his book where Branson reports regretting what he said in haste, or what an extravert would hear come out of his mouth as he thought aloud. Of course he extraverts his auxiliary function, but which is this?

### **A judging or a perceiving orientation?**

I have already discussed Branson's potential SP personality, of someone who likes adventure and is constantly seeking new business opportunities and challenges. The perceiving sensate or extraverted sensing is evident in his descriptions of the balloon and boat crossings of the Atlantic. In business as well as in leisure activities there is always an opening for change and rapid acceptance of new challenges and new directions. He seems to be energised by his "resourcefulness in adapting to the demands of the moment" (Myers, 1998, p.7). The point of closure is not important, it finally just comes to fruition when the groundwork has been completed: as happened when the first edition of the *Student* newspaper was published.

Branson is certainly not an SJ Guardian guided by the rules of the establishment. From an early age he "thought rules were there to be broken" (Branson, 1998, p.36). At 15, with another student, he tried to change traditional rules at his school. As a parting

comment his headmaster predicted that he would either go to prison or become a millionaire" (p.45). He did both!

### **How is Branson's type reflected in the ISFP dynamics?**

ISFPs are 'acutely aware of the specifics and realities of the present—the people and the world around them. They learn by doing more than by reading or hearing.' (Myers, 1998, p.20). From an early age Branson found learning in school to be abstract and meaningless. A good example was his mathematical inabilities: however, as soon as he had a purpose, he could apply mathematical principles. He reports that 'it was only when I was using real numbers to solve real problems that maths made any sense to me' (Branson, 1998, p.36).

Concern about inappropriate school rules prompted Branson and his friend Jonny Gems to start a student newspaper—for all students, not just those in their school. Here he shows how he was "guided by a strong core of inner values and [wanted his] outer life to demonstrate those values" (Myers, 1998, p.23).

This ISFP guiding philosophy has been at the core of all of Branson's business challenges. By his own account, his involvement in *Student* magazine focussed on obtaining money from advertisers and getting the magazine published while Jonny worked on the vision of the content and the ideologies to be presented in the magazine.

"The auxiliary extraverted Sensing leads ISFPs to be finely attuned to their external environment, noticing people and the natural world around them" (Myers & Kirby, 1994, p.13). Certainly Branson is energised by being in the natural environment and through recognising and promoting the strengths in others. He has always brought people into his businesses because of their strengths: strengths which he saw as supplementing his own.

Branson has the ability to recognise value in the vision of others and to make their vision a reality; but always the visions he endorses are congruent with his core values to provide people with freedom of choice in their purchase of goods and services. At age 43, he shows that his developed ISFP type has now taken on board his inferior extraverted thinking preference, when he says:

Whenever I see people getting a bad deal I want to step in and do something about it. Of course, this is not pure altruism - there's a profit to be made too. But the difference is that I'm prepared to share more of the profit with the customer so that we're both better off. The maverick in me was also quietly amused that the guy who brought you The Sex Pistols could sort out your pension too ...

I still believe that a fifty-fifty partnership is the best solution to financing. When something goes wrong, as it invariably will at some point, both partners have an equal incentive to put it right.' (Branson, 1998, p.439)

In the early business years things just happened and success came because a gap had been filled which was welcomed by people. Branson learned from those he employed who provided the synergy to support his less-developed functions. Now he can capably run all aspects of any business, but he continues to provide the opportunity for others to grow and to develop their potential with the backing of the Virgin and Branson names.

### Type development: clearly an ISFP?

This opening quote provides an excellent perspective on Branson's type development, starting with his dominant introverted feeling:

The basic principles are that people matter and that small is beautiful ... shape the enterprise around the people.

Auxiliary extraverted sensing then follows: "build businesses, do not buy them." His tertiary introverted intuition says "be the best, not the biggest; capture every fleeting idea; drive for change." And finally, at 43, he has well come to terms with his inferior extraverted thinking—even though his final statement may suggest some awkwardness:

... a very practical point, persuade the government of the merits of competition—that is slightly biased!

In his autobiography Branson has spoken his type. He shows how his ISFP type has developed from the early years of valuing his positive and supportive family environment, and the joy of having one special friend who remained close and became a partner in several enterprises. His dominant introverted feeling is demonstrated throughout the text.

In his teens auxiliary extraverted sensing (SP) is demonstrated in his unwillingness to be restricted by others' rules, and learning best when living the moment and actively organising the details of the production of the *Student* newspaper.

Branson's tertiary introverted intuition probably was developed early due to his dyslexia, but is evident when, between the ages of 20 and 28, he started a synergetic collection of businesses with a record mail-order business; several record shops; a manor house set up with a recording studio; a record label and music-publishing business; and a nightclub.

In those early years, realising that he was lacking in financial and organisational skills, Branson selected trusted individuals who could provide strong thinking preference skills. Now his inferior

extraverted thinking is well developed, enabling the Virgin businesses to run efficiently based on ISFP values and principles. Shepler (n.d.) describes Branson as an entrepreneur who:

... keeps each enterprise small and relies on his magic touch of empowering people's ideas to fuel success ... He writes [to] all 5000 Virgin employees, a chatty letter once a month from his paper notebook, and invites them to write or call him with their problems, ideas and dreams.

They do ... and new Virgin successes are born. ☒

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**At the root of [leadership] effectiveness is the ability to communicate meaningful information and build relationships among organizational members ... Executives appear to be slow in grasping this fundamental lesson.**

Roger R Pearman 1998, *Hardwired Leadership*.