

## Young at heart

The Virgin brand is now much older, but none the wiser... in the best ways possible by Vanessa Khalil



Richard Branson hasn't aged a bit. Sure, the party boy and business mogul behind Virgin Group may have lost some golden hairs to greyer ones, but his sense of humor and adventure remains intact, and even brought him back to Beirut 12 years after Virgin Megastore opened in Lebanon. Against all political and economic odds, Branson came to celebrate the launch of Virgin Radio Lebanon, because, as he told reporters in a media roundtable held at Beit Misk in early May, "foolish political leaders shouldn't affect the mass of people in the country. Lebanon is, once again, a little bit on a knife edge, everybody can see the misery happening in Syria, and people who are old enough remember the misery that happened in Lebanon. I believe that people here are sensible enough not to let that happen." Being the businessman that he is, he also believes that downtime is a good time to invest: "Everything costs a fraction of the price. We have a responsibility investing in a downturn, because if everyone freezes, you'll never get out of it."

It is a philosophy that Branson lives by in his business and personal life. Along with many bricks-and-mortar music stores, Virgin Megastore worldwide is struggling to sustain its business model and filed for insolvency in France earlier this year, as "people are not really buying music anymore". While in the MENA region, Branson tells *Communicate Levant*, it's surviving surprisingly well. "People who have been running the [Virgin] Megastores in this region have been quite clever. We've made the mistake overseas of having just music, whereas they had a varied product offering." Under the same philosophy, Virgin maintains brand control over its operations worldwide, but always trusts their local gut, so much so, that the man on top is not very familiar with Virgin Megastore's Lebanon plans and operations. Besides, Branson doesn't have the time for it. He's spent the past few years applying his skills to non-profit challenges, such as The Elders organization, which he set up with worldwide leaders and peacemakers who "spend time in Palestine and Israel to try to

install sense into the situation, help Palestine have the dignity of an independent state, and get the leaders in Israel to realize that giving Palestine an independent state is in Israel's long-term interest." He also has the B Team, which helps businesses address social problems instead of "just being money making machines".

Branson pulls off poise very well, addressing world hunger, diseases, carbon footprint problems and more. But his latest challenge, Virgin Galactic, the world's first airline offering suborbital space-flights to space tourists, shows the British magnate is still as eccentric as ever. He's eyeing deep space exploration in the future but, for now, he wouldn't advise anyone on an early bird registration to his space oddity. "We believe we've built a very safe space program. It will take two or three years to see if we were correct, and then it's up to us to get the price down so it is affordable to everyone."

It is not the first time Branson has had a wild idea, all in the name of growing the Virgin "halo effect" and "sexy feel," especially back in the day when he had "no money for advertising". Admittedly, he nearly killed himself doing so. "I think individuals who start companies need to use themselves to put their brand on the map. In our adventurous [period], we've tried to cross the Atlantic in a hot air balloon, ended up in the sea being rescued by a helicopter; we tried to cross the Pacific in a hot air balloon, ended up missing Los Angeles by 3,000 miles and were rescued by helicopters in the Arctic. Then, we tried to get around the world in a hot air balloon, and we crashed into many different seas. We have ended up being rescued by helicopters so often that we now sponsor the London's Air Ambulance helicopters. The first time we tried to break the transatlantic speed record in a boat, I remember people asking: "What if the boat sinks? You're running an airline, that wouldn't look good." We sank, and I remember the Virgin boat sticking out of the water, and all you could see was the word Virgin. We got rescued by helicopters as well," Branson tells *Communicate Levant*.

However, for Virgin Radio Lebanon, the decision is all market research, hardly intuition. Lebanon joins the UK, France, Canada, Italy, India, Thailand, Turkey and the UAE in hosting the Virgin Radio franchise. Its international success was mainly driven by its "ten hits in a row" format, says Najj Chenabieh, the station's general manager in Lebanon. Virgin Radio Lebanon – airing on 89.5 FM – will be the only radio station in the country to be commercial break-free on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, and to air Top 40 hits on Friday and Saturday nights. What it lacks in ad revenues on-air, the station is hoping to compensate off-air, with a marketing and advertising model that combines "traditional" with new media, and offers tailor-made, all-inclusive campaigns for advertisers. Or, as Branson simply puts it: "Humor is important, and having DJs that don't speak too much is important." ■