



Pushing the Boundaries

An Interview with Jean Oelwang,
Chief Executive Officer, Virgin Unite



EDITORS' NOTE Before assuming her current post, Jean Oelwang helped to lead successful mobile phone start-ups in South Africa, Colombia, Bulgaria, Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, and the U.S. She has worked for the Foundation for National Parks and Wildlife in Australia and in numerous volunteer roles, including a stint as a VISTA volunteer. In 2003, she was joint CEO of Virgin Mobile in Australia when she went to work with Richard Branson and Virgin staff around the world to create Virgin Unite. Oelwang sits on the advisory board of the Elders, the board of the Carbon War Room, and on the board of the Bushbuckridge Health and Wellness Trust.



Jean Oelwang (left) and at the launch of Richard Branson's book Screw Business as Usual (Penguin Portfolio), December 2010 (top left) and at the opening of the Branson Centre of Entrepreneurship – Caribbean, in Montego Bay, Jamaica, September 2011 (top right)

ORGANIZATION BRIEF As the entrepreneurial foundation of the worldwide Virgin Group, Virgin Unite (www.virginunite.com) brings together people and entrepreneurial ideas to reinvent how we live and work in the world to help make people's lives better. Their aim is to do their part to revolutionize the way businesses, government, and the social sector work together – driving business as a force for good. The organization also incubates new, independent approaches to leadership.

What was the vision behind creating Virgin Unite and what is its mission?

Over these past 40 years, Richard (Branson, Founder) and the Virgin Group have developed loads of entrepreneurial energy and resources that could be used for good. In 2004, the non-profit foundation Virgin Unite was started to unite all the Virgin communities globally to bring about positive change.

Our focus is on a way of living and working that helps make people's lives better, and on showing that business can, and must, be a force for good. We focus on three core areas: Global Leadership Initiatives, by incubating new approaches to global leadership, such as the Elders, the Carbon War Room, and the B Team; Business Innovation, by providing support services to businesses to help them innovate by putting people and planet alongside profit in all they do; and Community, by building a powerful community of people who never accept the unacceptable and who believe in the power of entrepreneurial ideas to change the world.

How do you determine which issues to support?

We are focused on entrepreneurial ideas that can help scale change rather than specific issue areas. Virgin Unite works in three ways to catalyze change in the world: the first is working with the Virgin businesses to ensure that as a group, we are walking the talk, whether that's Virgin Active opening up a fantastic new gym, thereby engaging the community of Soweto in South Africa; creating a Branson of Entrepreneurship with Virgin Holidays to support the growth of sustainable businesses in the Caribbean; or developing a Caring for Carers program with the Virgin Care health business in the U.K.

Also, we're fortunate that through the Virgin brand we're able to bring together unlikely partnerships among governments, businesses, and the social sector to catalyze long-term systemic change. These new leadership initiatives include the Elders, a global group of eminent leaders tackling some of the world's toughest and most pressing issues, such as conflict resolution; the Carbon War Room, scaling market-based solutions to reduce carbon; the B Team, a group of global business leaders helping to make business better; and the Entrepreneurship Hub, a global platform to broaden access to resources and markets to enable young entrepreneurs to build great businesses.

Additionally, we use the voice of Richard and the Virgin brand to create influential advocacy campaigns such as the war on drugs, encouraging companies to 'Screw Business as Usual', and Gaia Rocks, our campaign to help protect the earth's natural resources.

To support all of our work, we have a community of people, including a wonderful group of global entrepreneurs we call Virgin Unite 24902 who are working together on new approaches to tackle issues.

Would you highlight some of Virgin Unite's key initiatives?

Some of the biggest gaps in the approaches to global issues center around the destruction of our natural assets, global conflict, and the current model of doing business. To help address these gaps, we have partnered to create initiatives like the Elders and the Carbon War Room, and joined up with fantastic organizations, such as WildAid, to help support the conservation of our natural assets.

The best way to stimulate local economies and build resilient communities is to invest in people with the ideas, passion, and commitment to make a positive impact on the world through the businesses and subsequent jobs they create. We identified a gap in the access and resources available to entrepreneurial young people in South Africa and the Caribbean. To address this, we have launched two Branson Centres of Entrepreneurship in Johannesburg and Jamaica, which offer young entrepreneurs business training programs; access to mentors and business networks, facilities, and resources; and ongoing support to help them grow their businesses and, in turn, help create opportunities in their communities.

We've also been working with former PUMA CEO Jochen Zeitz to create the B Team, which was named one of 'the-most-dynamic-social-innovation-initiatives-of-2012' by *Forbes*.

Would you highlight the value in having Richard Branson's unique vision to build the culture within Virgin Unite?

Richard always describes himself as "Dr. Yes" as he can't say no to great opportunities. He talks about being "constantly curious" and this is something that we encourage at Virgin Unite – to constantly look out for new ways of thinking to focus our efforts and create entrepreneurial approaches to catalyze change. Richard helps to ensure that we are always pushing the boundaries – he loves to think big.

What excited you about the opportunity to lead Virgin Unite?

In the early '90s, I worked in a shelter for homeless teenagers in Chicago and I realized how broken our systems are – from government to the charitable sector to business. All of these sectors were working in silos and not giving these young people the chance to lift themselves out of poverty.

In the mid-'90s, I helped to set up a mobile phone company in South Africa. It was amazing to see how the mobile phone became an overnight poverty alleviation tool by giving entrepreneurs the chance to start and grow their businesses. I realized then the power of business to use its core products and services to give people the tools they need to lift themselves out of poverty.

Those two moments have embedded in me a healthy obsession with how we can break down the silos among government, charities, and businesses to create entrepreneurial approaches to issues. I feel incredibly fortunate through Virgin Unite to be a catalyst for business as a force for good in the world. ●