

Would *you* tuck your customers into bed one night?

 By [Aki Kalliatakis](#)

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With Valentine's Day coming up and thoughts of love in the air, it strikes me that it's a good time for us to prove how much we love our customers. Why is it that we seem to find it so difficult to show warmth and caring for people other than those closest to us? Love has never been shown to be a limited resource, and, on the contrary, the more love we show towards other, the more seems to bounce right back to us.



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Some people don't seem to have a problem with this. No one will argue that Sir Richard Branson is amongst the most successful businessmen and entrepreneurs that has ever existed. His companies - and there have been more than four hundred of them - are incredibly successful by any measure.

Most Virgin Group companies make a great deal of profit, even in industries where competitive rivalry is robust. Staff love working there, and the businesses are universally admired by media and other stakeholders. But most important of all, customers adore the company, its brands, and what the company represents.

Branson has done some crazy publicity stunts, but it is the normal day-to-day things that make him so beloved. His people adore him, and crave to be with him. He gives them the freedom to do what is right, and encourages every single employee to get involved in charity work that gives back to others in less-privileged communities.

He jokes and plays with them - a lot. I witnessed him throwing a Virgin Active staff member into the pool at the opening of one of the first clubs in South Africa, but she wasn't and couldn't have been offended because within seconds he also dived

in, fully clothed. And then the excitement and the fun started...

Branson visibly shows support to his staff, especially when they are in crisis, but also when, for example, they reach major milestones in their careers. The first Virgin Atlantic "trolley dolly" that reached a long service landmark was greeted on the plane by Branson leaping out of the luggage racks, handing over a huge bunch of flowers, and telling her to take the rest of the day off because he would do her duties on that flight. Of course, the passengers loved that too.

And customers do love him. On one flight to Heathrow that arrived at about 5:30am, I witnessed a commotion in the gate that was right next door to ours. A few minutes later we heard that a late incoming flight from the Far East that had experienced a large delay was personally greeted by Branson, who shook hands and kissed babies of every single passenger even as he handed over vouchers for a free flight.

This attitude is very symbolic for all people on his team, and legendary stories have emerged about how people who work at Virgin companies respond to customers. On one occasion, witnessing a little 5-year-old girl who was crying at the check-in desk for a flight from Johannesburg to London, one of the ground crew, Kathy Geyer, comforted her and asked what was wrong. Beatrix was upset because she couldn't take her goldfish in the bowl to London, and her daddy had threatened to flush it down the toilet. Kathy immediately took little Beatrix by the hand, and told her they would organise to transport the fish "in the hold", but Beatrix would have to hand it over first. Trustingly, she did so, and the staff in Johannesburg scrambled to phone London to arrange for an exact replica of the fish and bowl. Early the next morning the family landed, and a young man in a bright red jacket approached little Beatrix to tell her that her goldfish was in his office.

And now, one final story. At the recent opening of the Chicago Virgin Hotel, Richard Branson actually read a bedtime story, and then tucked in and kissed an adult couple who had won some kind of a prize. (You can see the video here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVUtxdJaw10>)

There are so many special things that you can do for your customers this Valentine's Day. Give them something for nothing if you must. Remind them about how special and important they are to you and your business. (After all, you don't get to put food on the table if it weren't for them.) Get them some chocolate or flowers, and maybe even a card.

But wouldn't it be just a lot better - and a lot more fun - if you could tuck them into bed or something?

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