

Chapter 3 – Punching above your weight: winning the credibility game

There I was, sitting on an uncomfortable old chair, with a plastic cup of cold, weak tea in my hand. I was waiting outside an office in a business park on the outskirts of Leicester. The meeting had been tough to set up, and it was proving even harder to make it past the rather frightening-looking secretary sitting in front of me.

But I had to persist. On the other side of Madam Medusa was an individual whose help I needed to secure a contract. An hour passed. Then another. Finally, I was told the meeting had been cancelled because of an overrunning commitment.

As I sat on the train for the long trip back to London, I thought fondly of the old days, the glory days – the endless queues of people trying to pitch their next big idea to me when I was at Virgin. Even Paul Keating (the former Australian prime minister) had tried to sell me on the idea of a new internet business.

I thought about the dinners with musicians such as Peter Gabriel and a whole host of sports stars. I thought about the ‘who’s who’ of prominent politicians, business people and celebrities that were desperate to be associated with us at Bond Corporation in the months after Alan’s involvement helped Australia win the America’s Cup.

I had taken it all for granted. Now here I was on a very late train, returning from a meeting that a middle-manager couldn’t be bothered to take!

As unpleasant as I found this experience, you’d better prepare yourself for even greater frustrations. It’s the business-builder’s lot to be treated as the lowest of the low, unimportant, just another time-waster. Only when you succeed will you have them eating out of your hand.

But there’s a catch. This is not just an ego problem, although of course it’s unlikely to help your self-esteem. There’s a very real threat to the survival of your business. You need to secure the help of suppliers, finance providers, employees, possibly partners – and, of

course, customers – to have a business.

All this got me thinking on the trip home from Leicester that day. When you're starting with just an idea, how do you get the right doors to open and have those key meetings scheduled? It all boiled down to credibility. People had to believe you could do what you were promising. Otherwise you were just wasting their time and money.

So I had to think seriously – very seriously – about credibility. My background was useful here. The fact that I had worked with Bond Corporation, McKinsey and Virgin could open certain doors. But others, as I now knew, remained resolutely closed.

Access – or lack of it – is a common complaint among business-builders. But I wasn't going to fall at the first hurdle; I had to develop strategies to get my fingers through the slightest cracks in the doors and prise my way in. Persistence, a thick skin and relentlessness will all help. But they will not be enough on their own. You need strategies and tactics. One tactic became obvious: positive public relations (PR). Just watch people salivate when you can hold up a newspaper or magazine cutting that sings the praises of your product... or, at the very least, mentions it.

This is a tactic that I should have been aware of from day one. I had, after all, worked at Virgin and no-one uses PR to better effect than Richard Branson. During my time at Virgin, I did realise the value of PR, but took it for granted – it was available on tap! Doors would open, conversations light up and actions would be taken quickly with the benefit of reams of positive press coverage. Out in the harsh real world on my own, I quickly saw quite the opposite when I didn't have any press at all for my new venture. Absence certainly does make the heart grow fonder!

I finally understood Richard Branson's maniacal obsession with PR. Richard had never forgotten the value of PR in starting out and growing the Virgin brand.