

But will Aventura get a park-and-ride lot?



he difference between Britain and the United States is that over there, Richard Branson had to be knighted before he could be called Sir, but here we figure anyone who could make \$5 billion using Virgin as his brand name will be answered “Yes, sir!” to virtually any request.

In fact, that has probably been true here since he made his first half-billion, so someone should pass along the message that he can stop knocking himself out.

To be honest, the branding has always puzzled me on that one. I can see where Apple and Amazon and even Visa are words that suggest freshness or power or mobility, some quality or virtue that has positive associations for people seeking to expand their reach in life by spending their consumer dollars.

Is Virgin a word with that sort of appeal in contemporary society? Is it intended as some kind of sly sexual innuendo? If so, what is its promise? Is it meant to be understood as something new and untested, as in “virgin soil”? How is that appealing for a company undertaking to fly you safely across long distances?

Well, there is no quarreling with success. Whatever people are hearing in that word is somehow appealing to them; and having spent billions in pursuit of that appeal, they are showing no signs of slowing down. Branson is pushing the frontiers of space, and his net worth is in the stratosphere. And down here on Earth, we are beset everywhere by Virgin spinoffs, all kinds of goods and services that are benefiting from the success of this legendary brand.

Branson Brands the Rails

Written by Jay Beskin, BT Contributor
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Not a lot of that activity takes place in the United States. Somehow the brand that originated in England has enjoyed most of its success on that side of the pond. Perhaps because the Virgin Queen is still remembered fondly there. After all, she was Queen Elizabeth I, and although she died in 1603, today's queen is Elizabeth II. Be that as it may, Virgin has not shared the same magic stateside, and indeed Virgin America Airlines got swallowed up by Alaska Airlines, so the flight attendants no longer have to blush when they make their announcements during flights.

But if the air Virgin is now an ice queen in Alaska, the train Virgin is already getting ready to warm up in South Florida. Yes, Virgin Trains is part of the Branson transportation empire, perhaps the least likely to be heard of by Americans.

We don't have much of a culture in train travel anymore in this country, and unlike a plane, a train is not a mode of travel from England to America. Other than a tragic derailment in 2007, Virgin Trains does not generally make international news, unless you happen to be a fan of the Darlington Football Club, which plays soccer, not football. All in all, not an American corner of international commerce.

Until now, that is. In April 2019, Branson purchased Brightline Trains and renamed it Virgin Trains USA. Well, to be more exact, he purchased about two percent of the company. How that makes sense, for a 1/50 stake to be worth rebranding the entire product, I leave for savvier business analysts than I. But we now find ourselves in South Florida with an express rail service based in Miami and carrying the Virgin brand. This is something so new, so untried, like -- you should excuse the expression, virgin soil.

But Sir Richard is convinced that he will succeed, and he has a good track record with success, better than you or me, in fact. One is not predisposed to hazard business predictions running counter to his. And he said in April at the rechristening that once Americans discover the opulent comfort available on a modern train, they will be, er... making tracks.

It sounded awfully unrealistic to folks who have been living here all their born days, but if he can make it happen, then all power to him. And maybe, a few more billion.

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Which brings us to our beloved burg of Aventura. The city commission in the past two weeks passed two resolutions to facilitate a Virgin train station serving Aventura. It is to be located west of the railroad tracks at NE 197th Street and will be connected to Aventura Mall by a pedestrian bridge (although projects associated with Sir Branson are rarely pedestrian in nature). At the present time, this is slated to be the only stop between Miami and Fort Lauderdale. The price will not be a bargain, but current assessments -- predicated on the questionable premise that prices will hold stable -- are that Aventura's commuters will still find it cost effective to head into their offices in Miami or Fort Lauderdale. And Miami-Fort Lauderdale rail commuters should not be too thrown off their game by adding a stop along the way.

The one question I have not seen adequately addressed is that bugaboo of all city planners: parking. There is one key difference between a commuter train system with scattered stops across a sprawling urban area and the multi-stop neighborhood trains of New York and Chicago. In New York or Chicago, commuters walk a block or two to the train, then ride it to within a block or two of their destinations and walk the difference.

Here a system with a stop in Miami and a stop in Fort Lauderdale needs a dedicated parking lot on each end. Most people will not be living within walking distance of the train station, so the car remains a part of the daily commute, albeit a minor part. You drive six, seven, eight, ten blocks from your house to the train, park your car at the station, then take the train for 20 miles.

That being the case, I am concerned that the plans I have seen thus far for the Aventura stop have not included a parking area near the station. If commuters originating in Aventura cannot park cars conveniently for the day at minimal cost, the financial and convenience calculation breaks down. Once you subtract Aventura commuters from the mix, the train stop is only useful for shoppers who are parking their cars on the Miami or Fort Lauderdale points of the triangle. That may be a significant audience, but it hardly seems like enough to carry a project of this scope.

I hope this important concern is addressed. (Perhaps there are plans already for this, which have not been publicized.) I would like to see this project bear fruit; not remain a virgin, so to speak. Yes, Sir?

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