

REACHING FOR THE STARS

This year's Conference features a must-see line-up of speakers

CAST aside the typecast images when you hear "former employee of Richard Branson", and "qualified rocket scientist", and instead, meet keynotes Katrina Barry, MD of Contiki Australia, ex employee of Virgin Australia and Robert Wickham, Regional VP Innovation & Digital Transformation at Salesforce and Aeronautical Engineer.

KELLI SULLIVAN - CLUBS NSW EVENTS EXECUTIVE

2018



CONFERENCE PARTNER



KATRINA BARRY, MD, CONTIKI AUSTRALIA

Katrina, take us through your first day at Contiki:

I was excited but already exhausted, considering the enormous task I had ahead of me, and feeling like an amusing blend of uncool and old, given the average age of staff at Contiki is around 24. Starting at 38, I came away thinking, "OK, there's a big challenge here. Strap in, a big strategic shift needs to happen". To be able to really understand what is going on within a business and to understand the customer – who they are and why they are choosing to experience your brand – you have to go undercover. I spent the first week in the office, getting to know people and getting my head around the role. The second week I went on my undercover Contiki trip – pretending to be 28, not 38!

Not many people can say they have worked with Richard Branson. What did you learn from him?

I learnt so many things and could go on for hours, but I will share two important things in particular:

Richard has incredible belief in finding out the why? He is not interested in talking to advisors, rather preferring to speak with "normal" people – the front-line staff. What makes Richard successful is having a real connection with real people; and a belief that Virgin and any vertical business should serve them. He needs to have a firm understanding why Virgin should pursue different business avenues.

Most people think Virgin is quite cavalier, versed in making offhand decisions, given the various business failures to date such as Virgin Make-up, Virgin Brides and Virgin Water to name a few. What people don't know is that Richard surrounds himself with people smarter than he is. Whilst Richard makes the public decisions, there is a hidden layer of smarts behind him such as ex-McKinsey Consultants and Goldman Sachs bankers. One thing I learnt is to not be afraid of having people behind you who are smarter than you are. Your success is absolutely determined by the quality of the people around you. ▶

ROBERT WICKHAM, REGIONAL VP, SALESFORCE

Richard, prior to launching into the business world, you played cricket for Trinidad in the Under-19 team. How did that assist you in your future career?

At the time, West Indies cricket was still at its peak. Every young boy in the Caribbean, myself included, wanted to play at that level. I was conflicted though, as I also dreamt of becoming an astronaut. A few of my Trinidadian teammates went on to play for the West Indies (including Brian Lara) as I ventured off to MIT to study Rocket Science. Playing for Trinidad was an amazing experience and one of my fondest memories. It taught me from an early age the importance of being part of a team as well as the value of hard work and preparation.

Tell us three things you learnt from your time spent at MIT and Harvard. What could clubs learn from your experiences?

MIT was an incredibly intense and life-changing experience. The calibre of people (students and faculty) was inspiring yet also intimidating. It was like a gym for the mind—a place where you get to exercise and develop certain fundamental strengths. What stands out most from my MIT years is the power of cognitive diversity – the creativity and rich innovation that emerges when you bring together people from diverse backgrounds, experiences and abilities. MIT also taught me how to apply a system engineering approach to problem solving – how to break complex problems down into its “first principles” and solve those one at a time. Whilst MIT instilled rigour, Harvard Business School allowed me to develop a different muscle – judgement. The case method forces you to integrate multiple sources of (often incomplete) information and make quick decisions. These are skills I continue to rely on today.

You once wrote that preparation drives confidence and everything else is beyond your control. When did this ring true for you?

A few years ago, I delivered a keynote in front of 7000 people. The preparation was taxing and lengthy. I even rehearsed using my young kids as the audience (if you can hold their interest you are doing OK). During the keynote, there was a technical glitch with the slides that distracted me for just a fraction of a second – long enough though for me to lose my train of thought. Panic was about to set in, but instead I drew on the confidence I had built from the preparation, took a deep breath, regrouped and was able to resume without seemingly missing a beat. I have since shown my kids the replay and thankfully they cannot find that moment – I sometimes use this to reinforce with them the value of preparation.

You have been a member of two boards. What are your three top tips to ensure boards remain relevant and dynamic?

Steer but don't row – using the analogy of a boat, know the difference between the role of the board (to steer) and management (to row). Challenges arise when these roles are not clear or when the board grabs hold of the oars. Challenge yourself to see around corners – we live in highly disruptive times. The World Economic

Forum refers to this period as the 4th Industrial Revolution where everything is becoming hyper-connected and intelligent. New technologies are emerging at unprecedented rates and applying enormous pressure on traditional business models. How to respond is now a board level agenda. As a result, board directors need to have a working understanding of these new technologies and how they might impact the strategies of their respective businesses.

Maintain healthy scepticism – today, more than ever, good governance demands pressure testing assumptions, data and strategies as well as asking tough questions. Don't take as gospel everything presented to you. ►



KATRINA BARRY

What can clubs learn from your time with Virgin and Contiki?

There are a lot of similarities between the two: both are consumer-branded services where the only competitive advantage is found in culture, and an absolute obsession with member experience. This is particularly important for clubs. Clubs are built on culture. People go to clubs because they want to seek a connection with others, and they want to feel like they are part of the club's culture and community.

Both Virgin and Contiki have an incredible internal culture, which ultimately become the outward-facing culture of the company. This internal culture is what drives the obsession with the member experience. What clubs can learn from Virgin and Contiki is the importance of creating an absolute obsession with member experience – focusing on every touch point from the sign-in experience, the member communications that are sent out, the standard of presentation within the club, down to the design of the walkway through the club.

What about a time in your career when it just didn't work, when you wanted to throw in the towel?

I was working at Bankers Trust, back in the dawn of social media. We had just launched a social media team, and I was tasked with establishing a social media strategy at the same time we were launching the company's digital assets, such as the website and blending through the social channels. The challenge I was faced with was that the bank didn't want to invest in digital, and no one understood social media.

I needed a social media team solely to focus on servicing clients, however the bank felt this was the call centre's role. My challenge was to get them to realise that it is the customer who chooses how they wish to communicate with the company, not the other way around; and that if they didn't cater for this and didn't have a social

media crisis-management plan in place, they could potentially get caught up in a complete brand meltdown in the space of 15 minutes.

What kept me from throwing the towel in? Tenacity, and following through with things I had committed to. Growing up as a Kiwi farm kid, I have a value around excellence and doing things well – don't bother doing something unless you're going to do it right.

Tell us three light bulb moments you have had within your career?

Don't chase the money, chase the experience. Most organisations don't invest in really understanding their customer, so go undercover. Creating incredible internal staff culture is more important than your shareholders. If you have happy staff, they will make your customers happy, which will make your shareholders happy. Focus on your staff, not your shareholders, and results will come.

As co-founder of Virgin Active, what key element do you feel threw that brand into the spotlight, and equally, what has kept it there?

Virgin as a brand had a 99 per cent awareness in Australia – everyone is familiar with Virgin, and most people have a positive perception of the brand. Virgin Active was lucky it had this brand equity to lean on in the early stages, however, what ultimately threw it into the spotlight was the obsession with customer experience. When launching in 2008, most people had a poor perception of the fitness industry, with our market research revealing people felt it was harder to get out of a gym contract than it was to leave a marriage.

We decided to challenge this, and forget the need to make money. We decided to stick two fingers up to the big guy, and launched Virgin Active with no contracts. Whilst this was risking the business model, we felt that we had to back ourselves, and deliver an extraordinary customer experience that made people want to stay, not force people to stay.

ROBERT WICKHAM

How will technology transform the workplace in the next decade?

We are entering the age of Artificial Intelligence or AI. Ten years from now, AI will be as commonplace as electricity. I have a vision that like Tony Stark in Ironman, we will all have our personal AI systems with us at all times. These systems will allow us to control every aspect of our lives and introduce unprecedented levels of productivity. At Salesforce we talk of Intelligent Experiences – where AI is infused in every business process - similar to the way electricity is infused in the things we take for granted (e.g. appliances, electronics, machinery). Once this happens, every business function will become intrinsically smarter – whether its sales, service or marketing – and a lot of the friction customers and employees experience today will be alleviated.

Name one key element that allows a business to remain viable year on year.

The expectations of customers today are being driven by brands that did not exist 5-10 years ago. These brands have redefined the level of experience customers now expect if not demand. Moreover, today's customers are hyper-connected, always on, highly opinionated and have super computers in their pockets that give access to anything they need to know about your company, your products and even your competitors. In this new normal, businesses must focus now more than ever on their customers – in fact, they need to obsess about the experience and success of their customers. This obsession has to be authentic and pervasive throughout the business and delivered by employees that are engaged.