To-do lists are only useful if you DO them

There has been lots of debate recently about the usefulness of to-do lists, so I put it on my to-do list to jot down my own thoughts on the matter. I can confidently state that our culture of notes and thoughtful to-do lists has made Virgin what it is today.

The crucial part of a to-do list is in the name – you need to actually DO the things on your list. The act of writing your tasks and thoughts down is useful in and of itself, as it helps to organise your thoughts and give you focus. However, if you then ignore your own advice and don’t follow up, the lists will lose most of their power. Quite often you will only do 50 per cent of things on to-do lists because, on reflection, only 50 per cent are worth doing. But by putting things on lists it will help clarify what’s worth doing and what’s worth dropping.

“Do you really think Richard Branson and Bill Gates write long to-do lists and prioritise items as A1, A2, B1, B2, and so on?” asked Mr Kruse. I can assure him that I do indeed write to-do lists and prioritise items. I live my life by writing lists – there is one next to me right now. Without to-do lists, I would use my time far less effectively, and have a lot less fun. People wonder how I fit in kitesurfing and tennis every day alongside business meetings – the answer is good planning and to-do lists. My habit has also rubbed off on many of our team, who are also avid note-takers and to-do list makers.
I am constantly amazed when I go into meetings and am the only person taking notes, and then converting these into actions on to-do lists. It’s how I get things done. If you don’t write things down, you will have forgotten them before you leave the room. We could never have achieved a tenth of what we’ve achieved without systematic lists and actions.

The author Paul Hannam joined our Virgin Podcast recently and talked about making a list of three things he was grateful for every morning to give him energy and enthusiasm for the day ahead. I’d wholeheartedly recommend following in his footsteps.

Judith Woods, writing in the Telegraph, agreed that “every time I draw up a new to-do list, I feel genuinely invigorated”. She also correctly noted: “The idea that Sir Richard Branson or Lord Sugar got where they are today without making lists is preposterous.”

However, she went on to add that “they might still do, but they probably elevate it and call it something more grandiose, such as “the Eisenhower Decision Matrix”. I can assure you that I still call my to-do list a to-do list, and I use it every day. I would recommend everybody does the same.

Do you use a to-do list? If not, put “make a to-do list” at the top of your list. You’re on your way!
Alexis Blanc Vernet - Bristol, United Kingdom
On my to do list: I have written to find how to contact directly Sir Branson before the end of the day. Not to speak about the weather but because I have a question for him. It keeps me excited to try to find this good way! Sir Branson, be patient, I will find soon!
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Sajid Shaboo - Managing Director, Owner at Construction Company
I am making a good salary from home $12000-82500 / week, which is amazing. Under a year ago I was jobless in a hostile economy. I thank God daily I was blessed with these instructions and now it's my duty to pay it forward and share it with everyone. Here is how...
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Muhammad Habib Ur Rehman - Faisalabad, Pakistan
I am making a good salary from home $12000-82500 /week, which is amazing. Under a year ago I was jobless in a hostile economy. I thank God daily I was blessed with these instructions and now it's my duty to pay it forward and share it with everyone. Here is how...
Like · Reply · 2 · Mar 7, 2013 1:05am

Michael Charles
Love it! I'm an avid note-taker. I get ideas all the time. I would forget half of them if I didn't write them down. I used to have post-it notes strung all over my desk but now keep all my notes (and-to-do items) in a single Notepad text file...no more!
Like · Reply · 1 · Mar 7, 2013 4:47am

Raahid Hussain - University of Wales, Newport Gwent, Wales UK
I think To-do-list can be helpful in organizing daily business activities that are not routinely done. Writing down familiar and routine activities in every morning can be boring and unnecessary.
Like · Reply · 1 · Mar 7, 2013 4:33am

Daniel Parsons - Works at Kunini Electrical, Lighting & Solar PV Contractors & Installers
I use a notepad all day and add these notes to my to-do list. Get it out of your head and free your mind for more inspiration.
Like · Reply · 3 · Mar 7, 2013 4:54am

Bart Hufnleister - Player 1 at Brand new game
If you want to make your To do list and brainstorm meetings more fun and more effective, you can always turn it into a GameStorm. We actively help companies to define their Top 5 Priorities in 'short 3 hour meetings'. The end result is always an overview of 9 stopping actions, 9 starting actions and the potential impact on your business in terms of 'money per month/...You can watch a short presentation about it on our website, http://www.brandnewgame.com/3/progress-loop/1
Like · Reply · 3 · Mar 7, 2013 5:30am

Helcrose Somerset Lundall - Works at Self Employed/Own Business
Do you seriously get people to sit through a 3 hour meeting? Won't dare watch or 'short' presentation. And you get people to pay for this? I'd pop off, and I'm a snorer of note.
My to do lists are filled with mind maps, lists and simple diagrams. Looks like a dog's breakfast, my handwriting is so bad, but I know exactly what I've accomplished at the end of the day. I use that to make prep on the next day's tasks. Simplicity is the key.
Sir Richard - I salute you!
Like · Reply · Mar 7, 2013 3:45pm

Helcrose Somerset Lundall - Works at Self Employed/Own Business
Do you seriously get people to sit through a 3 hour meeting? Won't dare watch or 'short' presentation. And you get people to pay for this? I'd pop off, and I'm a snorer of note.
Like · Reply · Mar 7, 2013 5:36am

High Heeled Life
Sir Branson - I may not be running an empire like you (yet) but I love that you have To-do-lists, as I live by mine - I call it my important Reminders list... and really encourage the women I work with to WRITE things down... not just on their technical devices but to use pen and paper...