

What People Say

Raving reviews about the Pool Theory's effects:

"The Pool Theory should be required reading for every executive who has ever said, "We'll deal with that when the time comes. This book is a clear, strategic reminder that trust, visibility, and authority must be earned before the spotlight hits — not during."

— Jason W., Head of Marketing

"In a world full of empty messaging and manufactured moments, The Pool Theory cuts through with clarity. It's not just about crisis PR — it's about building a brand that people believe in when it counts."

— Merilee S., PR and Branding Executive

"Working with Tiffany and the team at Arma Communications transformed how we approached communication. The Pool Theory captures the very approach that helped us grow our brand, increase stakeholder trust, and sleep better at night."

— Jordan S., Startup Owner

THE POOL THEORY

The Strategy Behind the
Brands People Follow, Refer,
and Defend

By Tiffany Muehlbauer

Owner & Co-Founder of Arma Communications Inc.

THE POOL THEORY

The Strategy Behind the Brands People Follow, Refer, and
Defend

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“If you only speak when it’s urgent, don’t be surprised when no one listens.”

— *Tiffany Muehlbauer*

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction: Why You Need a Pool Before the Fire Starts | 14 |
| What Is The Pool Theory? | 15 |
| Why It Matters in Today’s Business World..... | 16 |
| Companies Who Thrive vs. Companies Who Scramble | 17 |
| How to Use This Book | 17 |
| Tylenol and the Power of a Full Pool..... | 19 |
| Before the Storm: The Foundation Was Already Built | 20 |
| During the Crisis: Masterclass in Crisis Management | 21 |
| After the Storm: Rebuilding with Clarity and Purpose | 22 |
| The Result..... | 23 |
| The Pool Theory in Action..... | 23 |
| Chapter 1: Diving into the Pool Theory | 25 |
| Your Pool Is Brand Equity — Before You Need It..... | 26 |
| The Pool Theory Is Proactive, Not Reactive | 26 |
| What’s in a Full Pool? | 27 |
| How Big Does Your Pool Need to Be? (It’s Not One-Size-Fits-All)..... | 28 |
| The Pool Is Not Just for Crises | 31 |
| This Book Will Help You Build Your Pool..... | 32 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Coming Up Next: Why Companies Fail Without It | 32 |
| Worksheet: What’s In Your Pool?..... | 34 |
| Bonus Exercise: What Size Is Your Pool? | 37 |
| When the Pool Is Empty: United Airlines and the Dragging Incident of 2017 | 40 |
| Before the Incident: A Reputation Running on Fumes..... | 41 |
| During the Crisis: Every Misstep Was Magnified | 42 |
| After the Firestorm: Damage Control, But No Redemption Arc..... | 43 |
| What United Could Have Done Differently — Through the Pool Theory Lens..... | 43 |
| The Pool Theory in Action — Or Absence..... | 44 |
| Chapter 2: Why Companies Fail Without It | 46 |
| Mistake #1: Waiting Until There’s a Problem to Build Credibility | 47 |
| Mistake #2: No Clear Voice, No Clear Story | 48 |
| Mistake #3: Treating Communications Like a Light Switch..... | 49 |
| A Note About Luck | 50 |
| Your Company Doesn’t Have to Be Famous to Be Vulnerable..... | 50 |
| Coming Up Next: How to Start Filling Your Pool | 51 |
| Worksheet: Where Are Your Brand Risks? | 52 |

When the Pool Drains Fast: The Collapse of Silicon Valley Bank.....55

- Before the Fall: A Niche Brand Without Broad Trust56
- The Crisis Unfolds: Fear Moves Faster Than Facts56
- What Went Wrong: A Crisis of Communication and Confidence.....57
- What SVB Could Have Done Differently — Through the Pool Theory Lens58
- The Pool Theory in Action — Or Absence.....60

Chapter 3: Build Authority, Not Noise 61

- What Real Authority Looks Like62
- The Mistake Most Companies Make63
- The Three Pillars of Brand Authority.....64
- A Real-World Example: Ben & Jerry’s Bold Clarity64
- Crafting Your Authority Statement: More Than a Mission, Less Than a Manifesto.....65
- Real-World Examples.....67
- Your Authority Doesn’t Have to Be Global.....68
- Coming Up Next: Your Authority Builder Project69
- Worksheet: Build Your Brand Authority.....69

Clarity That Compounds: How Patagonia Became the Trusted Voice.....73

| | |
|--|----|
| The Foundation: A Brand That Knows What It Stands For | 74 |
| The Moment: Brand Trust That Withstood Controversy..... | 75 |
| The Relationships That Followed..... | 76 |
| The Pool Theory in Action..... | 77 |
| The Lesson Before We Move On..... | 77 |
| Chapter 4: Relationships Are Your Lifeguards | 78 |
| The Problem: Most Companies Forget the People | 79 |
| Not All Relationships Are the Same | 80 |
| Real Life Example: Starbucks & Social Capital..... | 81 |
| The Relationship Ripple Effect..... | 82 |
| What Relationships Are You Nurturing?..... | 83 |
| Worksheet: Relationship Map..... | 84 |
| Between the Waves: How Southwest Stayed Afloat | 88 |
| Before the Storm: A Brand Built on Loyalty and Humanity | 89 |
| During the Crisis: Accountability with Empathy..... | 90 |
| What Went Right: The Power of a Full Pool..... | 91 |
| What Other Companies Can Learn — Through the Pool Theory Lens..... | 92 |
| The Pool Theory in Action..... | 93 |
| Chapter 5: Crisis Is Too Late to Learn to Swim | 94 |
| The Myth of the Crisis Genius | 95 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Crisis Communication Is Amplification | 96 |
| Real-World Example: BP and the Deepwater Horizon Disaster | 96 |
| The Cost of Getting It Wrong..... | 97 |
| The Real Cost — or Reward — of How You Show Up | 97 |
| What Great Crisis Responses Have in Common | 98 |
| Coming Up Next: Crisis Simulation & Prep | 99 |
| Worksheet: Crisis Simulation & Prep | 99 |
| When Pressure Finds You Ready: Johnson & Johnson and the COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout..... | 104 |
| Before the Moment: A Brand Built for Calm Under Pressure | 105 |
| During the Rollout: Confidence, Clarity, and Calm | 106 |
| The Routine That Made It Work..... | 107 |
| What Others Can Learn — Through the Pool Theory Lens | 108 |
| The Pool Theory in Action..... | 108 |
| Chapter 6: The Routine – How to Stay Ready..... | 110 |
| Not All Brand Activity Is Equal: Water vs. Movement | 111 |
| The Rhythm of Relevance..... | 113 |
| What Consistency Looks Like in the Real World | 115 |
| Burnout Is Not a Strategy | 116 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Real-World Example: How a Government Affairs Firm Quietly Took the Lead..... | 117 |
| We Didn't Start Big — We Started Small..... | 117 |
| The Results Came Quietly — and Powerfully | 118 |
| The Pool Theory in Action..... | 119 |
| Coming Up Next: Metrics That Actually Matter | 120 |
| Worksheet: Your Pool Maintenance Calendar | 121 |
| Bonus Exercise: Water vs. Movement..... | 124 |
| When Visibility Isn't Enough: Peloton — From Darling to Doubt and Back Again | 126 |
| From Growth to Overreach..... | 127 |
| The Backlash Begins: A Series of Brand Hits.. | 128 |
| Where the Pool Started to Dry Up..... | 129 |
| The Foundation Still Held | 129 |
| What Peloton Could Have Done Differently — Through the Pool Theory Lens..... | 130 |
| The Pool Theory in Action — and Maintenance Mode | 131 |
| Chapter 7: Metrics That Actually Matter | 132 |
| The Two Types of Brand Metrics..... | 133 |
| Start With This Question: What Are We Trying to Influence? | 134 |
| Three Signals Your Pool Is Growing | 135 |
| My Approach to Measurement..... | 136 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Real-World Example: A Construction Company Rebuilds Its Reputation — and Its Visibility... | 137 |
| At the Same Time, a Leadership Shift Was Underway..... | 138 |
| What We Changed | 138 |
| What Happened Next | 139 |
| The Pool Theory in Action..... | 140 |
| Coming Up Next: Tracking the Pool Over Time | 140 |
| Worksheet: Brand Health Tracker..... | 141 |
| When the Scoreboard Lies: Boeing and the 737 Max Crisis | 144 |
| Before the Storm: A Brand That Took Trust for Granted | 145 |
| During the Crisis: The Narrative Took Off Without Them..... | 146 |
| The Breakdown: Misaligned Metrics and a Missing Message..... | 147 |
| After the Storm: A Slow and Painful Rebuild . | 147 |
| What Boeing Could Have Done Differently — Through the Pool Theory Lens..... | 148 |
| The Pool Theory in Action — or Absence..... | 149 |
| Conclusion: Your Pool Is Your Power..... | 150 |
| This Isn't About Perfection. It's About Practice. | 151 |
| Where Do You Go From Here?..... | 151 |
| Ready to Build Your Pool? Start Here..... | 152 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Final Words: Fill It Now. Not When You're Thirsty. | 153 |
| Worksheet: Quarterly Pool Check-In..... | 155 |
| Closing the Loop: Netflix and the Power of Rebuilding the Pool | 159 |
| What Netflix Did Right — After Getting It Wrong | 160 |
| By 2020, the Brand Was Unrecognizable — In the Best Way..... | 162 |
| The Final Lesson: You Can Always Refill the Pool — If You Start Now..... | 162 |
| The Last Word: Build It Now, Lead When It Matters | 164 |
| Take the Next Step: Download Your Pool Theory Tool Kit | 166 |

Introduction: Why You Need a Pool Before the Fire Starts

There's an old truth in business that few take seriously—until it's too late:

The time to prepare is long before you need to.

That's the heart of *The Pool Theory*. It's a simple idea with powerful implications: just like you wouldn't build a pool to fight a fire *while* the flames are already rising, you can't expect to build trust, visibility, and goodwill *only* when your company is facing a challenge.

Instead, you need to build it now. Quietly. Consistently. Strategically.

Because one day, you *will* need it.

What Is The Pool Theory?

The Pool Theory is a framework for proactive brand strength. It's a method of establishing your influence in your market to show your expertise and authority.

It's about deliberately filling your company's 'pool' — a reserve of trust, visibility, and narrative clarity — before you must draw from it. And once you have a pool you're filling up, you also need to keep movement present. Movement camouflages the 'ripples' that may happen should the worst occur.

Most companies wait. They focus on sales, product development, or operations; thinking PR, marketing, and messaging can come *later*. But when later arrives — in the form of a crisis, an opportunity, a funding round, or a media moment — they're left scrambling. The pool is dry or completely without movement. And building up a lively pool atmosphere under pressure never goes well.

The Pool Theory flips this reactive mindset. It's a philosophy of **preparedness**, grounded in the belief that **a company who communicates well before it needs to is more likely to succeed when it matters most.**

I spent decades crafting and practicing this philosophy myself before starting my own marketing agency, **Arma Communications**. The Pool Theory has been deployed to hundreds of clients who wanted to build and protect their brand equity, not just in times of need, but as part of their

everyday strategy. I've seen firsthand how having a full pool can transform not only how a person or company reacts to adversity, but also how it *capitalizes* on growth.

Why It Matters in Today's Business World

We live in a high-stakes, high-visibility world.

- A tweet can spark a news cycle.
- A quiet acquisition can explode into a reputational landmine.
- A funding opportunity can slip away if your public story doesn't support your private goals.

In this environment, being unprepared isn't just risky — it's negligent.

And yet, many leaders and business owners still wait for a problem to appear before considering what their brand *sounds* like, who trusts them, or how clearly their value is understood.

The companies who thrive today are the ones who invest in their narrative early.

They don't chase headlines. They shape perception.

They know who they are, how to communicate it, and how to build equity that works for them — in both calm and chaos.

Companies Who Thrive vs. Companies Who Scramble

Let's be honest: most businesses and brands aren't ready...

They don't have media relationships. Their leadership team doesn't know how to navigate tough questions. Their website is outdated. Their message is unclear.

And when something changes — whether it's a product failure, a CEO transition, a viral tweet, or a public opportunity — they go into panic mode.

Compare that to companies with a full pool:

- They have clarity around who they are and what they stand for.
- They've built trust with stakeholders — clients, media, regulators, investors, and the public.
- They can weather storms because their foundation was laid long before the forecast changed.

Throughout this book, we'll draw on real-life examples to show how preparation (or the lack of it), made all the difference.

How to Use This Book

This is not just a book to read. It's a book to work through.

You'll find practical frameworks, real-world examples, and interactive worksheets throughout each chapter.

These aren't fluff. They're designed to help you assess, plan, and take action. Whether you're an expert, a founder, a corporate leader, a small business owner, or a communications director, the exercises inside this book will help you build a pool that's ready when you need it.

Each chapter builds on the last, guiding you through:

- Understanding your current state
- Identifying gaps in brand authority and narrative
- Strengthening relationships and visibility
- Preparing for growth, scrutiny, or both

You'll also find prompts for reflection, project templates, and even QR codes to download editable versions of key worksheets. By the time you finish, you won't just *understand* The Pool Theory — you'll have begun building your own.

Let's begin...

The water you fill today could be the thing that saves you tomorrow — or opens the door to something bigger than you ever imagined.

Real Brands, Real Lessons

Tylenol and the Power of a Full Pool

In the fall of 1982, **Johnson & Johnson** faced one of the most chilling public health crises in American history.

Seven people in the Chicago area died after ingesting **Extra-Strength Tylenol** capsules that had been laced with **potassium cyanide**. The deaths appeared random and terrifying — the pills had been purchased from store shelves, seemingly tampered with after leaving the factory. Within days, panic swept across the nation. Tylenol, once a trusted fixture in American homes, was suddenly viewed as a potential poison.

In a matter of weeks, **Johnson & Johnson's market share plummeted from 35% to just 8%**. Most companies would

have entered survival mode — minimize exposure, deflect responsibility, protect shareholders. But Johnson & Johnson took a different path.

They had something rare: **a full pool.**

Before the Storm: The Foundation Was Already Built

Johnson & Johnson didn't just handle the crisis well. They were *positioned* to handle it because of choices made long before the crisis began.

The Credo

Since 1943, the company had operated under a written **corporate credo** — a values document that explicitly placed customers, patients, and the public above profits. It wasn't internal fluff. It was posted on the walls of corporate offices, regularly referenced in leadership decisions, and embedded into company culture.

Public Trust

In the years leading up to 1982, Johnson & Johnson had established itself as a **transparent, consumer-first healthcare company**. Tylenol was heavily advertised, widely trusted, and frequently recommended by doctors. The public had little reason to doubt the company's integrity — and that goodwill became a priceless buffer in the days that followed.

Healthcare Relationships

Because J&J had strong relationships with the healthcare community, hospitals and physicians didn't rush to condemn them. Instead, many waited to see how the company responded — and J&J earned grace through transparency and speed.

During the Crisis: Masterclass in Crisis Management

Johnson & Johnson acted swiftly and boldly:

- **They pulled 31 million bottles** of Tylenol from shelves nationwide — not just in Chicago — despite no evidence that the tampering was widespread. This recall cost the company over **\$100 million**, a staggering figure at the time.
- **They worked closely with the media** to ensure the public received consistent, fact-based information. Executives gave frequent interviews, held press briefings, and prioritized public safety in every message.
- **They immediately halted production and advertising** of Tylenol until they could ensure product safety. There was no spin, no finger-pointing — only responsibility.
- **They launched tamper-evident packaging**, becoming one of the first companies to use triple-seal technology. This innovation not only restored public confidence but set a new industry standard

adopted across the pharmaceutical and food industries.

- **Offered full refunds** to consumers who had already purchased Tylenol products — another cost that signaled empathy and accountability.

After the Storm: Rebuilding with Clarity and Purpose

Once the immediate crisis passed, Johnson & Johnson didn't declare victory and move on. They **used the moment to deepen their brand promise.**

- They **relaunched Tylenol** just two months later with tamper-proof packaging and a massive public education campaign.
- They **invested in transparent advertising**, featuring their new safety protocols and reaffirming their dedication to public health.
- They **re-engaged healthcare providers**, ensuring that doctors, pharmacists, and medical professionals understood — and could explain — why Tylenol was safe to use again.
- They continued building trust through consistent communications, educational outreach, and thought leadership around product safety.

The Result

By the end of 1983, Tylenol had regained more than 80% of its lost market share.

The brand didn't just recover — it came back stronger.

Even The Washington Post acknowledged the company's approach as a model, stating:

“Johnson & Johnson has effectively demonstrated how a major business ought to handle a disaster.”

In the decades that followed, Tylenol's response became required reading in MBA programs and crisis communications courses. It remains one of the most respected examples of **brand equity as a life raft**.

The Pool Theory in Action

What allowed Johnson & Johnson to survive — and thrive — wasn't fast PR.

It was **proactive trust-building, long-term relationship cultivation, and a clear internal compass** rooted in values.

They didn't try to build the pool during the fire.

They filled it years before — and because of that, when the moment came, they had something to draw from.

This is *The Pool Theory* at its clearest:

The time to prepare is before you need to.

And the people and companies who invest early — in trust, message clarity, and relationship equity — are the ones who make it through the storm.

Chapter 1: Diving into the Pool Theory

Most companies think visibility is something you turn on when you need it — during a funding round, product launch, or public crisis.

But visibility isn't a faucet. **It's a pool.**

And if it's not already filled before the moment you need it, you'll be left high and dry — or worse, making a mess as you try to fill it up under pressure.

This is the foundation of *The Pool Theory*.

It's a mindset.

It's a methodology.

It's a modern communications philosophy based on one clear principle:

You don't build a reputation when things go wrong.

You build it when things are calm — so you can draw from it when needed.

Your Pool Is Brand Equity — Before You Need It

Your personal or company's pool is the **stored value of your credibility, trust, and visibility.**

It's the thought leadership you've shared, the relationships you've built, the media coverage you've earned, the consistency in how your company shows up. It's the steady stream of clear, confident communication that tells the world: "We know who we are. We're ready."

Every company will face a moment when the spotlight swings their way — by choice or by force.

The question is: **Will you be ready for that moment, or will you scramble to catch up?**

The Pool Theory Is Proactive, Not Reactive

Let's get specific:

There are two kinds of companies, executives, or brands:

- **Reactive companies** don't think about PR, messaging, or positioning until a crisis lands or a major opportunity emerges. They start Googling 'crisis communications firm' after a negative headline drops. Or they rush to polish their image two weeks before a funding round or sales campaign.
- **Proactive companies** plan *before* the moment hits. They work behind the scenes to build personal and brand credibility, align their message, nurture stakeholder relationships, and create a reserve of goodwill that can be tapped when needed.

The difference is stark. And the results are measurable — in reputation, valuation, client retention, stakeholder interest, and employee confidence.

In my two decades of putting The Pool Theory into practice, I've worked with both types of companies. The reactive ones often come to us mid-crisis, exhausted and unprepared. The proactive ones? They use our team like an extension of theirs, filling their pool week by week — so when the call comes, they're already ahead.

What's in a Full Pool?

Here's what a 'full pool' often looks like in a business context:

- A CEO who's already known and respected by industry press

- A LinkedIn profile with consistent, values-driven thought leadership
- An internal team that understands the company's narrative and messaging
- Relationships with relevant media, regulators, or partners
- An email list and website that reflect professionalism and clarity
- A rhythm of brand presence — not a last-minute scramble

It's not about being flashy or everywhere.

It's about being *ready* — credible, visible, and trusted — when it counts.

How Big Does Your Pool Need to Be? (It's Not One-Size-Fits-All)

Not every brand needs a giant splash.

Not every company needs a global PR machine.

But every brand needs the **right-sized pool** — one that matches its **audience, risk, and ambitions**.

Local Pool (Small Business / Community Leader)

If you run a local business — a restaurant, a construction firm, a small agency — your audience is likely concentrated in one region. You don't need press in the

New York Times. You need to be recognized in your local newspaper, your Chamber of Commerce, and your City Council.

Your pool might include:

- Local press and business groups
- Neighborhood influencers or associations
- Happy customers who refer others
- A visible but manageable digital footprint (Google Business, Yelp, LinkedIn, etc.)

Goal: Be the trusted name in your zone. If someone Googles your service + city, you should appear — with credibility.

Regional / State-Level Pool (Growth Company / Trade Organization)

If you're growing or expanding, your pool needs to reach **multiple markets or industry-level audiences**.

You'll need:

- A presence in regional publications and trade journals
- Relationships with state-level policymakers or regulators
- Thought leadership and speaking opportunities
- A content strategy that shows you know your space — and deserve a seat at bigger tables

Goal: Be seen as a credible player beyond your hometown. Expand your influence while staying consistent with your values and message.

National / International Pool (Public Companies, High-Stakes Brands)

If you're a publicly traded company, a national nonprofit, or a brand in a highly regulated industry, your pool must support a wider range of stakeholders — often with **greater scrutiny** and **higher reputational risk**.

You'll need:

- Relationships with major media and analysts
- Regular presence in top-tier publications
- A clear, confident executive voice
- Owned media channels that scale (podcasts, newsletters, pressrooms, investor sites)

Goal: Influence opinion at scale — and be ready for national headlines, investor questions, or regulatory inquiries before they arrive.

The Key Insight

It's not about being everywhere. It's about being **proportionally present** in the spaces that matter most.

A five-person company doesn't need Fortune 500 coverage.

A publicly traded company can't survive with just a local newsletter.

Your pool should reflect:

- The **audience** you serve
- The **risk** you carry
- The **stage** you're playing on

You don't need a big pool.

You need a *right-sized*, well-maintained one.

The Pool Is Not Just for Crises

While The Pool Theory shines in crisis scenarios (as we saw in the Tylenol example), it's *just as critical* for seizing *positive opportunities*:

- A startup closing a Series B round and needing to boost investor confidence
- A local brand expanding nationally and needing to establish thought leadership
- A founder stepping onto a national stage and needing public narrative alignment
- A company quietly applying for government funding or incentives that require stakeholder trust
- A business owner looking to expand into a new business line

In these moments, **perception becomes leverage.**

And the people and companies who win are the ones who prepared long before the spotlight hit.

This Book Will Help You Build Your Pool

You don't have to guess what to do next.

Each chapter of this book will guide you through:

- Understanding what your company's current 'pool' looks like
- Identifying the gaps (before they become risks)
- Mapping out your messaging, media relationships, and credibility markers
- Creating your 'maintenance plan' to stay ready — without burnout

You'll find worksheets, reflection prompts, and real stories from businesses who got it right... and those who didn't.

If you stick with it — and take action — you'll walk away with a communications foundation that most companies never build until it's too late.

Coming Up Next: Why Companies Fail Without It

In the next chapter, we'll explore what happens when the pool is empty or lacks motion — not to scare you, but to show you what's at stake. We'll walk through case studies

of companies who had every opportunity to prepare... but didn't.

Their stories are cautionary. But they're also instructive — because you still have time.

Let's keep going. Your future audience is already watching.

Worksheet: What's In Your Pool?

A quick diagnostic to assess your company and brand's readiness:

Instructions:

Rate each item on a scale of 1-5: (1 = not at all true, 5 = very true).

Tally your score and reflect on where you stand.

1. Brand Visibility & Messaging

- We have a clear and consistent brand message.
- Our website communicates who we are and what we do effectively.
- Our social media presence is active and aligned with our brand values.
- Our leadership team has a public presence (e.g., press, social, speaking).

Subtotal: ____ / 20

2. Stakeholder Trust & Relationships

- We've built trusted relationships with key partners (media, regulators, funders, clients).
- Our internal team understands and can articulate our company's core narrative.
- We regularly communicate with stakeholders, not just when we need something.
- We have strong employee alignment and brand culture.

Subtotal: _____ / 20

3. Proactive Strategy

- We have a long-term content or communications plan (not just reactive).
- We've done scenario planning or crisis communication prep.
- We have a media kit, bios, headshots, or brand assets ready to go.
- We review and maintain our reputation regularly (not just after something happens).

Subtotal: _____ / 20

Your Total Score: ____ / 60

- **45–60** Your pool is filling up — and you're in a strong position. Stay consistent and refine.
- **25–44** You've started, but there are real gaps. This book will help you close them.
- **0–24** Time to start filling. Don't worry — that's exactly why this book is here for you.

Reflection Prompt:

- What surprised you about your score?
- What's one thing you can start improving this month?

Bonus Exercise: What Size Is Your Pool?

This self-assessment will help you gauge the right *scale* for your visibility efforts. You don't need a massive PR machine — just the right-sized pool to reach and influence the people who matter most to your business.

Answer the following questions:

1. Where are most of your clients or stakeholders located?

- [A] In my city or county
- [B] Across the state or region
- [C] National or global

2. How often are you mentioned in the media (local or otherwise)?

- [A] Rarely or never
- [B] Occasionally in local/regional press
- [C] Frequently in trade or national media

3. If a reputational issue occurred, how far would the impact reach?

- [A] Local clients or community
- [B] State or regional partners and networks
- [C] National customers, investors, or regulators

4. What level of public-facing activity do your peers have?

- [A] Basic (social media, networking events)
- [B] Moderate (speaking, press mentions, industry content)
- [C] High (podcasts, national press, global platforms)

5. What is the scale of the decisions you influence?

[A] My city or niche audience

[B] Multi-location or statewide partners

[C] National or international impact

Tally Your Answers:

Mostly A's → Small, Local Pool

Focus on trust and presence within your community. Invest in local press, networking, and reputation-building close to home.

Mostly B's → Mid-Sized, Regional Pool

You're growing beyond your zip code. Prioritize trade media, speaking opportunities, and authority across your sector or state.

Mostly C's → Large, National/Global Pool

You play on a big stage — and your visibility needs to reflect that. Develop national press relationships, high-level content, and scalable trust strategies.

*Remember: the size of your pool doesn't need to match your ambition — it needs to match your **audience reach** and **reputational risk**. Focus your energy where it counts.*

Real Brands, Real Lessons

When the Pool Is Empty: United Airlines and the Dragging Incident of 2017

In April 2017, **United Airlines** found itself at the center of a global backlash after a video surfaced showing a passenger — **Dr. David Dao** — being violently dragged off an overbooked flight at Chicago O'Hare.

The scene was jarring: a paying customer, bloodied and disoriented, forcibly removed from his seat to make room for United crew. Fellow passengers recorded the incident on their phones. Within hours, the footage was viral. **#BoycottUnited** trended on Twitter. Headlines flared across the globe. United's stock dropped by nearly **\$1 billion in market value** within 24 hours.

But here's what made the situation irrecoverable in the public's eyes:

It wasn't just the incident — it was the absence of trust.

United didn't have a communications crisis. They had a *credibility void*.

Before the Incident: A Reputation Running on Fumes

For years, United had been operating with a dry pool.

- The airline ranked consistently low in customer satisfaction surveys.
- Its brand voice came across as bureaucratic and impersonal.
- There were few emotional connections or standout customer loyalty campaigns.
- United's reputation was one of operational efficiency — not human-centered care.

In short: **they had not invested in public goodwill.**

There was no buffer. No history of generosity. No culture of proactive storytelling. So when the moment came, **there was nothing to draw from.**

During the Crisis: Every Misstep Was Magnified

Rather than owning the moment, United's response became a textbook example of **what *not*** to do:

- Their **initial public statement** was defensive and clinical. It referred to the violent removal as an effort to “re-accommodate” the passenger — a phrase that immediately struck the public as corporate doublespeak.
- **CEO Oscar Munoz's internal memo** praised employees for following protocol — failing to acknowledge the optics or human toll of the incident.
- It took **several days and mounting backlash** before the company issued a clear, public apology that showed remorse and responsibility.

In the absence of goodwill, every misstep became more painful.

The media — already primed by years of customer complaints — pounced.

Comedians skewered the brand. Memes exploded. U.S. lawmakers called for investigations.

The damage went far beyond the flight.

After the Firestorm: Damage Control, But No Redemption Arc

United eventually updated its policies, increased compensation for bumped passengers, and launched internal reviews. They even committed to reducing overbooking incidents and expanding staff training.

But none of it truly stuck with the public.

Why? Because **United hadn't built the relationship equity to earn a second chance**. There was no history of empathy, no pattern of transparency, no cultural narrative to reference. Their apology felt like crisis PR — not a natural extension of the brand.

Years later, the brand still struggles with lingering reputational baggage. Unlike Johnson & Johnson — which emerged stronger after its crisis — **United simply survived**. And in the age of high-stakes visibility, *mere survival* is a missed opportunity.

What United Could Have Done Differently — Through the Pool Theory Lens

Had United applied *The Pool Theory*, their story could have looked very different.

Here's what they might have done — **before** the crisis:

- **Proactively built goodwill** through customer-centric campaigns, transparency initiatives, and emotional

storytelling — creating familiarity and loyalty beyond price or convenience.

- **Developed a human-centered brand voice** for executive communications, especially during disruptions.
- **Trained leadership for rapid, empathetic public response**, backed by clear values and message alignment.
- **Monitored stakeholder trust** through brand health metrics and sentiment analysis — noticing they were running low on public patience long before the incident occurred.

And **during the crisis**, they might have:

- Issued a public apology immediately — not days later
- Provided clear, compassionate context for what happened — without spin
- Put forward a real human face, not just a press release

The Pool Theory in Action — Or Absence

Where Johnson & Johnson succeeded with a full pool, United collapsed into an empty one.

This case reminds us: **crisis doesn't build your brand — it reveals it.**

And when your foundation is weak, no amount of spin will save you.

The lesson for any brand, no matter the size or sector, is clear: **Invest in trust, visibility, and message clarity now — before the unexpected arrives.**

Because you don't get to build the pool *while the world is watching*.

You build it quietly, consistently, and intentionally — long before you ever need it.

Chapter 2: Why Companies Fail Without It

Every founder, expert, executive, business owner, and marketing team thinks *they'll know what to do when the time comes*.

But the truth is — when the moment hits and your company's in the spotlight — **you don't rise to the occasion. You fall to your level of preparation.**

The Pool Theory exists because we've seen what happens when businesses don't prepare.

When the pool is empty or without movement, even smart, capable companies fail.

They don't fail because their product was bad.

They fail because the *story around the product* became the bigger problem.

They didn't control the narrative — or worse, they had no narrative to control.

Mistake #1: Waiting Until There's a Problem to Build Credibility

Let's revisit the United Airlines incident in 2017.

A doctor is dragged off a flight. The video goes viral. The airline scrambles.

But the real damage? That had already happened — over years of indifferent customer relationships, poor communication, and a brand voice that felt impersonal and transactional.

There was no goodwill to fall back on. No reservoir of public trust.

So when something went wrong, the backlash was immediate, global, and merciless.

Now compare that to Tylenol's cyanide crisis in 1982 (as we saw in the Introduction).

Because Johnson & Johnson had a full pool — trust, empathy, and consistency — their response was seen as responsible, human, and ethical. The public gave them grace.

Lesson: When things go sideways, the public doesn't judge your mistake alone.

They judge your *track record*.

Mistake #2: No Clear Voice, No Clear Story

Another common failure? A company waits too long to define who they are.

No message. No point of view. No media presence. No voice.

So when they need to say something — to investors, to customers, to the press — it feels clunky, vague, or out of touch. And people notice.

Think of **Boeing during the 737 Max crisis**.

After two tragic crashes, Boeing's public communication was cold, legalistic, and slow. They focused on technicalities. They downplayed concerns. And they took far too long to show empathy.

The public and regulators didn't just lose faith in the aircraft — they lost faith in the company.

Even as Boeing eventually fixed the technical issues, the *brand damage* lingered. Because their voice didn't feel human. It felt rehearsed and defensive.

Lesson: In times of pressure, your voice must already be trained.

If you don't have one, people will assign one — and you may not like what they hear.

Mistake #3: Treating Communications Like a Light Switch

Visibility isn't something you 'turn on' when you need attention.

You have to **earn it** over time.

Startups often fall into this trap — building a product, raising money, hiring a team... and never once thinking about **what the outside world sees**.

Then, the day they need a press hit, investor trust, or public support, they realize:

- No one knows who they are.
- They have no press contacts.
- Their messaging is confusing.
- And their online presence doesn't match their internal ambitions.

By then, the clock is ticking — and they're trying to build a pool while the fire rages.

As I've worked with clients over the years, I've seen this scenario more than I'd like. And while it's possible to course-correct, it's much more expensive — and

emotionally draining — than simply doing the work beforehand.

Lesson: You'll almost always get the wrong kind if you wait until you need attention.

A Note About Luck

Some companies get lucky. They go viral. They get a media break. They attract a big-name investor out of nowhere.

But those moments **are the exception** — not the plan.

And even when lightning strikes, it only helps companies who are *ready* to capture it.

The pool isn't just a buffer against failure. It's the **launchpad for opportunity**.

Your Company Doesn't Have to Be Famous to Be Vulnerable

Let's be clear: The Pool Theory isn't just for Fortune 500 brands or household names.

It's just as critical for:

- A manufacturing company applying for federal funds
- A B2B service provider who relies on long-term client trust
- A startup raising its next round
- A CEO who needs to win over a skeptical board

- A company in a regulated industry where public perception affects policy
- A small business owner, expert, or consultant whose reputation drives referrals, revenue, and recurring work

Whether the stakes are public, political, or personal — the pool matters.

Because even if your name isn't on a billboard, your brand still lives in the minds of your stakeholders.

And they *are* watching.

Coming Up Next: How to Start Filling Your Pool

In the next section, we shift from caution to action.

You'll learn the foundational elements of building brand authority — not in a generic, buzzword-filled way, but with practical steps you can take *now*.

You'll also meet companies who did it right — and discover how small, steady steps create a huge payoff over time.

Get ready to build. You don't have to wait until it's perfect. You just have to start.

Worksheet: Where Are Your Brand Risks?

Use this worksheet to reflect on potential vulnerabilities in your brand visibility, communication readiness, and stakeholder trust.

Instructions:

Rate each item on a scale of 1-5:

(1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Be honest — your answers will help identify where your pool may be running low.

1. Visibility Gaps

- Our website accurately reflects our current brand and value proposition.
- We have a consistent presence on key social media or thought leadership platforms.
- Our leadership team has a recognizable and relatable public voice.
- We regularly share company news, perspectives, or success stories externally.

Subtotal: ____ / 20

2. Communication Readiness

- We have clear messaging that everyone in the company understands.
- We've discussed how we would respond to a public challenge or crisis.
- We have relationships with media or PR professionals if we need to communicate quickly.
- Our executive team is comfortable speaking on behalf of the company in high-stakes settings.

Subtotal: ____ / 20

3. Stakeholder Perception

- Our clients, partners, or funders would describe us as clear and trustworthy.
- We are seen as a leader or innovator in our space.
- We maintain regular, proactive communication with key stakeholders.
- We have internal alignment about how we want to be perceived publicly.

Subtotal: ____ / 20

Your Total Score: ____ / 60

- 45–60: Strong foundation, but stay vigilant.
- 25–44: Moderate risk — there's work to be done.
- 0–24: High vulnerability — start filling your pool immediately.

Reflection Prompt:

- Which area had the lowest score, and why?
- What is one immediate action you can take to reduce risk in that area?

Real Brands, Real Lessons

When the Pool Drains Fast: The Collapse of Silicon Valley Bank

In March 2023, **Silicon Valley Bank (SVB)**—a name long associated with innovation, venture capital, and startup banking—collapsed in a matter of days. While it was not the largest bank in the country, SVB was a pillar of the tech ecosystem. Its sudden failure didn't just shake the startup world—it rattled the entire global financial community.

The cause? Technically, a liquidity crisis tied to bond portfolio losses.

But the real driver? **Perception. Panic. And a brand without a buffer.**

Before the Fall: A Niche Brand Without Broad Trust

Founded in 1983, SVB built its reputation as the go-to bank for startups, growth-stage companies, and venture capital firms. It operated in a specialized niche—one that created deep ties within the tech world but left the bank relatively **unknown and untested** in the eyes of the general public.

SVB's client base was loyal, but highly concentrated. Most of its deposits came from venture-backed startups, many of whom had large balances far above FDIC insurance limits. These startups often relied on SVB not just as a bank, but as a financial partner embedded in their daily operations—from payroll processing to venture debt and credit facilities.

What SVB didn't build was **broad-based brand trust**. Outside its tight-knit ecosystem, the bank had minimal public-facing visibility. There was no mainstream media narrative about SVB's stability, no broad communications strategy aimed at founders or CFOs beyond its inner circle. Its leadership team was not publicly known or visible. And when concerns began to circulate, **there was no established voice to provide reassurance or context**.

The Crisis Unfolds: Fear Moves Faster Than Facts

On March 8, 2023, SVB issued a press release announcing a \$1.8 billion loss from the sale of part of its bond portfolio

and a plan to raise \$2.25 billion in capital. While technically sound from a financial risk management standpoint, the announcement was poorly timed and poorly explained.

There was no coordinated messaging.

No proactive communication to clients or the market.

No credible spokesperson offering clarity or assurance.

Within hours, venture capital firms began advising portfolio companies to pull their deposits. The next day, clients attempted to withdraw a staggering **\$42 billion**—the largest bank run in U.S. history by volume.

SVB's stock price plummeted, its credit rating was slashed, and its ability to raise capital vanished.

On March 10, just two days after the announcement, **Silicon Valley Bank was taken over by federal regulators.**

The collapse was swift, shocking—and in many ways, avoidable.

What Went Wrong: A Crisis of Communication and Confidence

SVB's failure wasn't solely about financial missteps. It was a failure of **preparedness, visibility, and leadership communication.**

- The bank had no **public reputation** for transparency or conservatism.

- Executives had not built personal brands as calm, trusted stewards of capital.
- There was no crisis response plan that included messaging to reassure clients, investors, or regulators.
- The press release that triggered the panic came without accompanying executive interviews, FAQs, or even real-time engagement.
- In a moment that called for immediate confidence, SVB went silent.

In short, **SVB had no pool to draw from.**

No reservoir of goodwill. No track record of clear communication. No deep relationship with the public.

And no emotional capital with founders beyond a transactional banking relationship.

Even many of its closest customers panicked—because they hadn't been conditioned to see SVB as a long-term, values-driven institution with a public presence and proven resilience.

What SVB Could Have Done Differently — Through the Pool Theory Lens

Had SVB applied the principles of *The Pool Theory*, the outcome may have looked very different. A stronger foundation of communication, visibility, and proactive trust-building might have slowed or even stopped the run.

In the years leading up to the crisis, SVB could have:

- Developed a **public-facing leadership voice** through media appearances, longform content, and thought leadership around stability, market insights, and risk.
- **Built relationships** with mainstream and financial press—beyond the tech niche—so that messaging in a critical moment could be shaped and trusted.
- **Actively communicated** with clients through proactive email updates, industry events, and C-suite briefings that built credibility over time.
- **Educated the market** about how its balance sheet worked and how it handled risk exposure—*before* the panic.

In the moment of crisis, SVB could have:

- Released a **comprehensive, empathetic, and transparent message** immediately—complete with a Q&A, executive video, and third-party validation from regulators or investors.
- Appointed a **well-known and credible executive** to speak to the public, media, and depositors directly.
- Used its community ties with venture capital firms to cascade **calm, coordinated messaging**.

None of those responses would have guaranteed success—but they would have created **time, trust, and options**. And in a crisis, those three things are everything.

The Pool Theory in Action — Or Absence

SVB wasn't a fly-by-night operation. It was a 40-year-old institution managing over \$200 billion in assets. And yet, **its lack of communication readiness made it vulnerable to a speed-of-social panic** that moved faster than any regulator or internal decision-maker could match.

This case reinforces one of the most important truths in brand management today:

Even institutions with size, scale, and success can be undone in days—if they don't invest early in public trust, clarity of message, and visibility.

The pool must be filled before the fire.

SVB found that out the hard way.

Chapter 3: Build Authority, Not Noise

In an age of endless content, constant updates, and algorithm-chasing, it's easy to confuse visibility with authority.

But here's the truth:

Authority isn't how often people see you — it's what they believe when they do see you.

You don't need to be the loudest. You need to be the *clearest*.

You don't need to say everything. You need to say the *right* things — at the right times — to the right people.

This chapter is about how to **build true brand authority**, not just 'marketing output.'

Because when the moment comes — good or bad — it's not the volume of your voice that matters. It's the *weight* behind it.

What Real Authority Looks Like

Brand authority means **people trust you**.

They take you seriously. They refer to you when forming opinions.

They think of your company as a leader — even when you're not speaking.

Real authority feels like:

- A client saying, "We've been following you for a while — we want to work with someone who gets it."
- A reporter calling *you* for comment, instead of you chasing them.
- A new client booking a call and saying, "I saw your post and forwarded it to my business partner — we knew you were the right fit."

- Investors and stakeholders feeling confident because your public presence mirrors your private competence.
- Employees proudly sharing your content because it aligns with why they joined your team.

Authority turns communication into *leverage*. It creates tailwinds in the moments that matter most.

The Mistake Most Companies Make

Too many people and businesses try to ‘go big’ with content and messaging — without first anchoring it in strategy.

They post constantly, say yes to every social trend, hire flashy PR firms... but their message is muddy.

Their tone is inconsistent. Their content is reactive. And their audience is confused.

This is noise.

And it’s not just ineffective — it’s harmful. Because once you lose trust or clarity, it’s **ten times harder** to win it back.

I always start by helping clients clarify their **Three Core Message Pillars** — the foundational themes that all communication should flow from. Without that foundation, even the most well-funded campaign won’t stick.

The Three Pillars of Brand Authority

While every brand is different, strong authorities usually stand on some version of these three pillars:

1. **Clarity** – You know who you are, what you do, and why it matters. Your messaging is simple, sharp, and repeatable — across platforms and people.
2. **Credibility** – You don't just say things. You show them. Through testimonials, case studies, earned media, speaking engagements, and consistency over time.
3. **Consistency** – You show up regularly, in the same voice, with the same standards. Whether it's your blog, your CEO's LinkedIn, your sales deck, or your email newsletter — it all feels like 'you.'

Without these three pillars, you're building on sand.

A Real-World Example: Ben & Jerry's Bold Clarity

Ben & Jerry's is known for ice cream — but their brand authority comes from something far more powerful: a clearly defined, unapologetically lived set of values.

They don't just sell pints.

They speak out on racial justice, climate change, LGBTQ+ rights, and fair trade.

And whether you agree with them or not, their messaging is consistent, clear, and unmistakably theirs.

When Ben & Jerry's released statements about criminal justice reform, paused ad spending on platforms that didn't align with their values, or published educational resources on systemic racism, they didn't do it to chase headlines.

They did it because they've been saying the same things — in the same voice — for decades.

That's what authority looks like: a brand that **leads conversations**, not one that scrambles to join them.

Ben & Jerry's doesn't just post content.

They build **clarity, consistency, and credibility** — and **over time**, that earns them attention when it counts.

Crafting Your Authority Statement: More Than a Mission, Less Than a Manifesto

In a world of noise, your authority statement is your signal.

It's not a tagline.

It's not your full bio.

It's a sharp, confident sentence or two that tells people exactly why they should trust you — and what you're here to lead on.

Authority statements make you memorable. They clarify your domain. They set the tone for all communication that follows — from emails to keynotes to crisis responses.

Think of it as your ‘elevator sentence,’ but instead of selling; it signals trust, leadership, and clarity.

A Strong Authority Statement Will...

- Declare your area of expertise or influence
- Reflect your values or core focus
- Be confident without being arrogant
- Be useful — it helps others understand how they can rely on you

A Weak Authority Statement Will...

- Sound generic or buzzword-heavy (“We deliver strategic excellence at scale.”)
- Try to be all things to all people
- Focus on credentials without signaling relevance or impact
- Include vague verbs like ‘empower,’ ‘support,’ or ‘optimize’ without specifics

Simple Formula to Start With:

Here’s a basic template that works across industries:

“We help [target audience] achieve [specific outcome] by [unique approach or principle].”

Or:

“At [Company], we lead in [space] by [value, method, or difference that sets you apart].”

Real-World Examples

Small Business or Consultant

“We grow by word of mouth — so we build trust in public the same way we do in private: by showing up consistently, sharing real insights, and helping first.”

Construction Company (Post-Crisis)

“We’ve built our reputation on craftsmanship and community — and today, our mission is to rebuild trust through transparency, safety, and showing up where it matters most.”

Founder or Executive Voice

“I speak to growing organizations about building trust before visibility — because credibility must lead your message, not follow it.”

Public Policy Firm

“We help high-growth companies navigate federal and state policy landscapes to unlock funding, shape legislation, and scale responsibly.”

Biotech Startup

“We lead in mRNA delivery innovation by making our research transparent, verifiable, and grounded in patient outcomes.”

Nonprofit Organization

“We’re ending food insecurity by designing locally-led, dignity-first delivery systems that last beyond a donation.”

Your Authority Doesn’t Have to Be Global

You don’t have to be Patagonia or Apple or Johnson & Johnson.

Your brand authority may need to speak to:

- Your regional clients
- Your investors
- Your trade partners
- Your regulators
- Your future hires

The size of your audience doesn’t matter.

What matters is how clearly and consistently you show up in the spaces that count.

Even in niche sectors — transportation, manufacturing, infrastructure, energy — your voice can (and should) be the trusted one in the room.

Coming Up Next: Your Authority Builder Project

In the next section, we'll work through a hands-on project:

Your Authority Builder Worksheet — designed to help you define your three message pillars and create a sustainable strategy for showing up with consistency and clarity.

You'll also begin drafting your first *Authority Statement* — a single paragraph that becomes your north star for content, press, speaking, and leadership messaging.

Because great communication isn't about sounding smart.

It's about sounding like yourself — when it matters most.

Worksheet: Build Your Brand Authority

Use this worksheet to develop your authority statement — a clear, confident articulation of what you do, who you serve, and why you're credible.

This isn't your mission or your marketing copy. It's a trust-building sentence or two that tells your audience what you lead on — and how they can count on you.

Step 1: Define Your Audience

Who are you trying to influence, serve, or reach?

Example: Startup founders, corporate leaders, policymakers, families, etc.

Your answer:

Step 2: Clarify the Outcome

What result do you help them achieve or what problem do you solve?

Example: Navigate regulation, build brand trust, scale with integrity, live happier in their home

Your answer:

Step 3: Identify Your Difference

What makes your voice or approach credible or different?

Example: 20 years in public service, data-backed strategy, human-first messaging, unparalleled technology

Your answer:

Step 4: Draft Your Statement

Use this starter format (or modify it):

“We help [audience] [achieve outcome] by [unique approach or value].”

OR

“At [company], we lead in [domain] by [distinct method or principle].”

Draft 1:

Draft 2 (refined):

Final Checklist:

- [] Is it specific, not vague?
- [] Is it confident, not salesy?
- [] Is it clear to someone outside your industry?
- [] Would this help a stranger understand your brand in 10 seconds?

Real Brands, Real Lessons

Clarity That Compounds: How Patagonia Became the Trusted Voice

Patagonia doesn't post the most.

It doesn't chase trends.

It doesn't advertise like its competitors.

But when it speaks, people listen.

When it acts, people follow.

And when it takes a stand — even a controversial one — **its brand becomes stronger, not weaker.**

That's not luck. It's not hype.

It's authority — built deliberately, communicated clearly, and protected over time.

The Foundation: A Brand That Knows What It Stands For

Founded in 1973 by climber and environmentalist Yvon Chouinard, Patagonia has always been more than an outdoor gear company. From the beginning, the brand's **North Star was environmental responsibility**, and everything flowed from that: product design, sourcing, storytelling, and marketing.

For decades, Patagonia's communications have reflected a few consistent themes:

- **Minimalist but bold messaging** — plain language that's instantly recognizable
- **Values-first marketing** — more time spent explaining *why* than *what*
- **A willingness to challenge customers** — even if it costs short-term sales (as in its famous 'Don't Buy This Jacket' campaign)
- **Transparency about supply chains**, repair policies, and climate impact

This clarity-built credibility.

That credibility created authority.

And over time, authority became **relationship equity**.

The Moment: Brand Trust That Withstood Controversy

In 2011, Patagonia made headlines when it ran a full-page ad in *The New York Times* on Black Friday — arguably the most consumer-driven day of the year. The ad showed one of their best-selling jackets, accompanied by the headline:

“Don’t Buy This Jacket.”

The message? The world doesn’t need more stuff. Buy thoughtfully. Buy less. Repair what you have.

Critics thought it might backfire.

Instead, it **galvanized loyal customers**, sparked global press, and positioned Patagonia as **the voice of reason in a culture of excess**.

The ad wasn’t a stunt. It worked because it **fit**.

It was consistent with the brand’s track record.

And that’s what made it believable.

In the years since, Patagonia has only deepened its brand authority:

- Donating **100% of Black Friday sales** to environmental causes
- Suing the U.S. government over public land policies
- Prominently labeling products with repairability info

- Releasing branded content focused on conservation, not commerce
- In 2022, transferring ownership to a trust to fight climate change — and **giving away its future profits to environmental efforts**

These moves weren't marketing plays. They were **brand declarations** — backed by decades of clarity.

The Relationships That Followed

Because of its authority, Patagonia has cultivated **some of the strongest relationships in modern retail**:

- **Customers** who feel part of a mission, not just a transaction
- **Media** who amplify the brand's message because it reflects genuine leadership
- **Employees** who stay for company culture, not just pay
- **Activists and nonprofits** who partner with the brand because they share values
- **Policymakers** who engage with Patagonia as a voice on environmental policy

In many ways, Patagonia's influence outpaces its market share. It's not the largest gear company. But it's the **most trusted** — because it leads with authority, not volume.

The Pool Theory in Action

Patagonia shows us that **when your message is clear, your relationships grow deeper.**

People know what to expect. They remember what you've said. They believe you when it matters.

Patagonia didn't build relationships by accident.

It built a message so consistent, so values-aligned, that people felt connected long before they ever bought a product.

And when the brand makes bold moves, **its community moves with it.**

The Lesson Before We Move On

The best relationships don't start with outreach.

They start with clarity. With purpose. With **authority that makes people want to engage.**

Patagonia has proven that you don't need to be everywhere — you need to show up with conviction and consistency in the places that matter.

Coming up next, we'll explore how **those relationships — once earned — become the lifeguards that protect your brand when things get tough.**

Because a full pool is built not only with messaging, but with the people who believe in it.

Chapter 4: Relationships Are Your Lifeguards

You've probably heard the phrase, "It's not what you know, it's who you know."

In business, we'd adjust that slightly:

It's not just what you say — it's *who believes you* when you say it.

You can have the best messaging in the world, a beautiful website, and a perfect pitch deck. But if you don't have *real relationships* behind the scenes — the kind built on trust and mutual value — your brand won't go very far when it counts.

In The Pool Theory, relationships are your **lifeguards**. They're the ones who pull you back when you're in over your head. They vouch for you when you're not in the room. They amplify your message, validate your credibility, and sometimes even protect your reputation when pressure hits. They help you keep the pool full and safe regardless of how much activity is going on.

The Problem: Most Companies Forget the People

Many brands pour energy into their digital presence but neglect the real-world relationships that make those efforts sustainable.

- They treat media as a one-way blast.
- They engage investors only during funding cycles.
- They think of regulators as obstacles instead of long-term partners.
- They forget that internal teams are brand ambassadors, too.

The result? When they *do* need support — whether it's during a crisis, a policy shift, or a high-stakes launch — there's no one to lean on. The lifeguards aren't on duty... because no one invited them to the pool. I've helped clients not just write better stories — but build better relationships with the people who *carry* those stories forward: journalists, policymakers, local officials, vendors, team members, clients, and community leaders.

Not All Relationships Are the Same

Let's break it down. The most important relationships for a healthy pool typically fall into five groups:

1. **Media & Influencers** – Do you have trusted voices who will cover you fairly — or at least give you a chance to tell your side of the story?
2. **Clients & Customers** – Do your buyers feel invested in your brand story? Are they willing to advocate for you when needed?
3. **Partners & Vendors** – Are you aligned on values and communication style — or will a misstep by them drag you down, too?
4. **Internal Teams** – Do your employees feel connected to your mission? Do they know what to say if asked about the company?
5. **Policy & Community Stakeholders** – In highly regulated or public-facing sectors, do you have allies who understand your work — and are willing to speak up when it matters?

You don't need relationships with *everyone*. You need authentic relationships with the *right* people. The kind you can't build in a weekend, but that pay off for years.

Real Life Example: Starbucks & Social Capital

In 2018, Starbucks was thrust into a reputational crisis after two Black men were arrested at a Philadelphia location — for sitting at a table without ordering anything while waiting for a friend. They hadn't caused a disturbance. They hadn't broken a rule. But a store employee called the police, and the men were handcuffed and escorted out in front of a room full of customers.

A bystander recorded the incident. The video went viral. And public outrage followed — fast and loud.

For many brands, **this kind of moment is fatal**. But Starbucks didn't disappear into damage control mode. Instead, it responded with speed, humility, and action.

The company closed more than 8,000 U.S. stores for an entire day to conduct racial bias training — a bold move that cost millions in revenue, but sent a clear signal: we take this seriously.

And while the incident absolutely caused damage, Starbucks weathered it better than most. *Why?*

Because they had spent years **investing in their reputation**. Not just with customers, but with employees, community leaders, and policymakers.

They had shown up before the crisis. So when the wave hit, they weren't alone.

- They had allies.
- They had advocates.

- They had a track record.

That's what social capital does.

It doesn't make you bulletproof. But it does give you breathing room to respond — and rebuild — when things go wrong.

The Relationship Ripple Effect

Good relationships don't just protect you from crisis — they create momentum and open doors. When your pool is full, the ripple of a misstep won't capsize you. Instead, it moves through a body of support that can absorb the wave and help you stay afloat.

Strong relationships lead to real rewards:

- Reporters start coming to you for quotes.
- Elected officials flag opportunities for collaboration.
- Vendors go the extra mile.
- Clients stay loyal, even when pricing or timelines shift.
- Employees recruit their smartest friends to join the team.

And it all stems from one principle:

People do business with people they trust.

What Relationships Are You Nurturing?

It's time to **take inventory**.

- Are you investing in relationships with the same consistency and care as you do your content or ad spend?
- Do you know who your real advocates are — and how to keep them engaged?
- Do you have people who will step in when the spotlight turns or the tide shifts?

In the next section, you'll complete a Relationship Map — a practical tool to:

- Identify your most valuable relationships
- Evaluate the current strength of those connections
- Spot the blind spots and build a plan to strengthen your network

Because when times get tough, your strongest defense won't be a tweet, a press release, or a last-minute apology.

It'll be the people who already **believe in what you're doing** — and are willing to say it out loud.

Worksheet: Relationship Map

This worksheet will help you assess your company's key relationships across five stakeholder groups. Strong relationships are your brand's lifeguards — use this tool to see where you're strong and where you may need to build.

Instructions:

1. List names or organizations you have a relationship with in each category.
2. Rate each on a scale of 1-5 for strength (1 = weak/no relationship, 5 = strong/trusted).
3. Add notes on how you currently engage with them and how you might strengthen the relationship.

1. Media & Influencers

Name: _____

Strength (1-5): ____

Engagement Notes:

Name: _____

Strength (1-5): ____

Engagement Notes:

2. Clients & Customers

Name: _____

Strength (1-5): ____

Engagement Notes:

3. Partners & Vendors

Name: _____

Strength (1-5): ____

Engagement Notes:

Name: _____

Strength (1-5): ____

Engagement Notes:

4. Internal Team

Name: _____

Strength (1-5): ____

Engagement Notes:

Name: _____

Strength (1-5): ____

Engagement Notes:

**5. Policy &
Community Stakeholders**

Name: _____

Strength (1-5): ____

Engagement Notes:

Name: _____

Strength (1-5): ____

Engagement Notes:

Reflection Prompt:

- Which category is strongest? Which needs the most attention? What's one small step you can take this quarter to deepen a key relationship?

Real Brands, Real Lessons

Between the Waves: How Southwest Stayed Afloat

In late December 2022, **Southwest Airlines** experienced one of the most significant operational meltdowns in the history of U.S. air travel. A brutal winter storm coincided with a cascading breakdown in the airline's internal systems—most critically, its **crew scheduling platform**, which had not been meaningfully updated in decades.

The result? Over **15,000 flights canceled**. Tens of thousands of passengers stranded. Lost luggage, missed holidays, and overwhelmed customer service channels. The company incurred an estimated **\$825 million in direct financial losses** and faced intense scrutiny from regulators and the public.

But despite the chaos, something unexpected happened: **Southwest didn't face the brand-shattering fallout that other airlines might have.**

Why? Because for decades, **Southwest had been filling its pool.**

Before the Storm: A Brand Built on Loyalty and Humanity

Southwest Airlines was never just another airline. Since its founding in 1967, it had positioned itself as a customer-friendly, quirky, people-first alternative in a sea of transactional air carriers.

Its strategy was not just operational — it was emotional. And it showed up everywhere:

- A culture of **employee empowerment** and quirky customer service touches — from singing gate agents to flexible ticket policies
- A transparent pricing model with no change fees or baggage fees — long before it became a trend
- Consistent messaging that positioned the airline as **friendly, reliable, and affordable**
- A **highly recognizable leadership style**, including frequent communications from top executives during both calm and crisis

These elements weren't one-off marketing tactics. They were part of a long-running system of **brand trust-building.**

Southwest had **earned a reputation** as an airline that treated people like people — and that trust had compounded over decades.

So when things went wrong, the pool was full.

During the Crisis: Accountability with Empathy

The meltdown was severe — and the media coverage was extensive. But Southwest didn't retreat into silence or legal jargon. Instead, the company leaned into the relationships it had built and kept the movement consistent.

- It **issued public updates in real time**, including social media updates, video apologies from CEO Bob Jordan, and explanations of what was happening.
- The **tone was human**, not corporate. The airline acknowledged frustration and took responsibility — even before full investigations were complete.
- It offered **refunds, reimbursements, and loyalty points** to impacted travelers, a gesture that was not perfect, but widely recognized as a step in the right direction.
- **Employees and unions**, who might have lashed out under different circumstances, largely supported the company's efforts and tone. The internal culture that had long prioritized respect and voice paid dividends when it mattered most.

- The press, while critical, was not hostile. Reporters pointed out flaws but often balanced their coverage with historical context, acknowledging the airline's reputation for generally strong customer service.

Despite the scale of the disruption, **Southwest's brand wasn't irreparably damaged**. Trust wavered — but it didn't collapse.

What Went Right: The Power of a Full Pool

Southwest made mistakes. The scheduling system failures were preventable. The disruption could have been anticipated. The systems could have been modernized sooner.

But when the crisis hit, **the brand didn't drown**. And that's because of what it had built beforehand:

- **Goodwill with customers:** Flyers may have been angry, but many gave the company the benefit of the doubt.
- **Strong internal culture:** Employees defended the brand, not just the paycheck.
- **Proactive relationships with media and regulators:** There was a history of cooperation, transparency, and trust.
- **A clear brand voice:** When the CEO spoke, it didn't sound like a damage-control exercise. It sounded like Southwest.

In crisis communications, the best statements don't need to *win people over*. They just need to *sound consistent with who you've always been*. Southwest's public reaction worked *because* of the brand narrative it had already spent years cultivating.

What Other Companies Can Learn — Through the Pool Theory Lens

Southwest's 2022 meltdown shows that even strong brands can face failure. But the difference is what happens next — and what the public expects when the pressure is on.

What Southwest got right, before the storm:

- It invested consistently in **customer trust and internal culture**
- It developed a **recognizable and human brand voice**
- It maintained **clear and consistent messaging** across leadership and platforms
- It showed up early and often — *before* it was forced to

What the company did right during the storm:

- Took ownership and responded quickly
- Delivered transparency, not spin

- Activated goodwill earned over decades to cushion the blow

Southwest didn't avoid the storm.

But it survived because its **relationships were its lifeguards.**

The Pool Theory in Action

The Southwest example underscores a critical point: **you don't have to be perfect — but you do have to be present.**

Over time, consistent brand actions build an invisible reserve of trust. When something breaks — a product, a process, a system — your audience asks, “Does this align with what we know about them?”

If the answer is “yes,” they stay with you.

If there's nothing to go on, they walk away — or worse, they turn on you. The public can be seriously unforgiving if no Pool Theory has been invested in.

Southwest Airlines shows us that **a deep, trusted brand can absorb impact.** It doesn't erase failure. But it keeps you afloat until you can regain your footing.

And that is the essence of The Pool Theory.

Chapter 5: Crisis Is Too Late to Learn to Swim

Every leader believes they'll know what to say when a crisis hits.

But when the headlines break, the phones light up, and social media turns hostile — even the best operators can freeze.

Not because they don't care. But because they're unprepared.

Crisis is not the time to start figuring out your voice, message, or values.

That work must already be done.

That's the heart of The Pool Theory — and nowhere is it more obvious than in a moment of public pressure.

If the previous chapters were about building strength, this one is about testing it.

The Myth of the Crisis Genius

There's a popular business myth: that a great leader will 'rise to the occasion' when things go wrong.

In reality, most companies don't rise — they scramble.

They issue vague statements.

They blame the wrong party.

They go silent — or say too much.

They act too slow — or act without strategy.

And the public doesn't wait.

The narrative takes shape with or without them.

I've helped clients navigate high-stakes moments ranging from product failures to lawsuits, public backlash, policy threats, and internal scandals. And I've seen one truth over and over:

The leaders and companies who survive — or even emerge stronger — are the ones who did the work before the storm.

Crisis Communication Is Amplification

Crisis doesn't create your brand.

It reveals it. And it amplifies what was already there.

If your company is known for transparency and empathy, your response will likely be seen as credible — even if it's imperfect.

If your company is known for defensiveness or inconsistency, the same words will fall flat — or worse, backfire.

That's why the real question isn't, "What will we say in a crisis?"

It's, "What will people expect us to say — based on who they believe we are?"

Real-World Example: BP and the Deepwater Horizon Disaster

In 2010, an explosion at the Deepwater Horizon oil rig caused one of the worst environmental disasters in U.S. history.

But what truly sealed BP's reputational damage was their tone-deaf response.

The company initially downplayed the scale.

The CEO famously said, "There's no one who wants this over more than I do. I would like my life back." — while families were grieving and coastlines were destroyed.

The messaging felt corporate, cold, and out of touch with the gravity of the moment.

BP was already seen by many as a giant, profit-driven oil company with little public goodwill. When crisis struck, that perception was confirmed — and amplified.

Lesson: If your pool is shallow, the heat will evaporate it instantly. There's no margin for error.

The Cost of Getting It Wrong

Crisis mismanagement has real consequences:

- Lost revenue from client churn or investor exits
- Talent loss due to shaken internal confidence
- Regulatory attention drawn by public backlash
- Brand damage that lingers far beyond the initial moment

Some companies never fully recover — not because they made a mistake, but because they mishandled the story around the mistake.

The Real Cost — or Reward — of How You Show Up

He was one of the most well-connected people in town — a beloved local chef and the founder of a thriving catering company. His business was built not just on flavor, but on presence: community events, local partnerships, and word-of-mouth buzz.

Then the unthinkable happened. A sudden accident left him in a wheelchair, facing years of rehabilitation and uncertainty. For many, it could have marked the quiet end of a promising career.

But because he had built trust — and kept communicating through the crisis — it became a different kind of story. His team stepped up. The community showed up. His bills got paid, the business kept running, and he never disappeared from public view.

Today, after years of struggle, he's walking again. And as he prepares to open his first brick-and-mortar restaurant, the public is rallying behind him with anticipation and pride.

This isn't a sob story — it's a success story.

Because when the pool stays full, and the communication stays clear, **your story doesn't stop when things get hard.** It deepens. It resonates. And people remember

What Great Crisis Responses Have in Common

When a leader or company does navigate a crisis well, it's rarely luck. It's preparation. And it often includes:

- Pre-established message pillars
- Trained spokespeople
- Internal alignment across departments
- Media relationships already in place
- Stakeholder trust built over time
- A clear communications chain of command

That's The Pool Theory in action: a foundation that allows you to respond, not react.

Coming Up Next: Crisis Simulation & Prep

In the next section, you'll step into the role of communicator-in-chief with a Crisis Simulation Worksheet — two hypothetical scenarios designed to test how you'd respond, what gaps exist in your current plan, and how to build safeguards before you ever need them.

Because when the stakes are highest, confidence doesn't come from charisma.

It comes from preparation.

Worksheet: Crisis Simulation & Prep

This exercise will help you test your readiness by walking through two hypothetical crisis scenarios. Use these simulations to identify gaps in your messaging, relationships, or internal coordination.

Instructions:

1. Read each scenario carefully.
2. Answer the guided questions.
3. Reflect on how prepared your organization really is — and what needs to be addressed.

Scenario 1: Product Recall

You discover that one of your company's flagship products has a defect that could pose a safety risk to users. While

no injuries have been reported, a customer has posted a video showing the issue — and it's quickly gaining traction online.

1. What is your first internal step?

2. Who needs to be informed immediately (internal + external)?

3. What will your public holding statement say within the first four hours?

4. Who will serve as the spokesperson? Are they trained?

5. What supporting materials (FAQ, internal talking points, etc.) do you need to have ready?

Scenario 2: Executive Misstep

Your CEO makes a controversial comment during a panel that is interpreted as dismissive of an important social issue. The comment is quoted in a trade publication and is now circulating on social media, with calls for accountability.

1. How do you assess the severity of the damage?

2. What immediate steps will you take internally?

3. Draft a short apology or response (3–4 sentences).

4. How do you align internal teams and reassure key stakeholders?

5. What long-term actions could support reputation recovery?

Reflection Prompt:

- Which scenario was harder to manage? Why?
- What does your response reveal about your current readiness level?
- What steps can you take now to close the gaps?

Real Brands, Real Lessons

When Pressure Finds You Ready: Johnson & Johnson and the COVID- 19 Vaccine Rollout

In 2021, as the world raced to vaccinate its population against COVID-19, **Johnson & Johnson** emerged with a single-dose vaccine candidate — a critical tool, especially for rural and underserved populations.

Unlike mRNA vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna, J&J's vaccine didn't require ultra-cold storage and was easier to distribute at scale.

But as their rollout began, the company faced enormous pressure:

- Political scrutiny over Operation Warp Speed and equitable vaccine distribution
- A skeptical public, hesitant about vaccine safety
- Intense media competition between vaccine brands
- A temporary pause by the FDA and CDC due to rare cases of blood clotting associated with the J&J shot

In other words: this was a **crisis in waiting** — the kind of moment where trust evaporates instantly if not carefully maintained.

And yet, Johnson & Johnson didn't flinch.

Before the Moment: A Brand Built for Calm Under Pressure

This wasn't Johnson & Johnson's first public health challenge.

For decades, the company had operated with a **consistent focus on public well-being**, dating back to its legendary handling of the 1982 Tylenol cyanide crisis (covered earlier in this book). That moment helped define the company's voice — and it never stopped refining it.

In the years before COVID-19, J&J invested in:

- **Reputation as a science-first, ethics-driven company**
- Deep stakeholder engagement in global health and pharmaceuticals

- Transparent, digestible communication around drug development
- Building credibility not just through products, but through **people** — scientific leaders, researchers, and public health advocates

By the time the COVID-19 vaccine entered public consciousness, **Johnson & Johnson's pool was already full.**

During the Rollout: Confidence, Clarity, and Calm

When their vaccine received emergency use authorization in February 2021, Johnson & Johnson handled the moment with precision:

- They **framed their narrative around global accessibility**, equity, and single-dose convenience — leaning into value, not hype.
- Scientific spokespeople, not just executives, **led communications**, reinforcing the brand's focus on substance over spin.
- When six blood clotting cases were reported (out of 6.8 million doses administered), J&J **supported the FDA pause**, even though it halted their rollout.
- They communicated with **transparency and empathy**, avoiding defensiveness, and provided context, data, and reassurance to the public.

- After clearance to resume vaccinations, they **didn't push aggressively** to reclaim market share — instead, they focused on restoring **confidence** through measured, trust-based messaging.

Unlike other pharmaceutical companies who responded with litigation, politics, or internal infighting, J&J's posture was simple: **public trust first**.

The Routine That Made It Work

What made this effort successful wasn't just the moment — it was the **routine discipline** the brand had built around communication:

- A practiced, centralized crisis response framework
- Designated medical and public affairs spokespeople
- Content pipelines for doctors, hospitals, and public health partners
- Longstanding partnerships with regulators and nonprofits
- Internal culture aligned around values, not just quarterly performance

This wasn't the first time Johnson & Johnson had to respond to high-stakes scrutiny.

But it was the **first time much of the public was watching in real time**.

Because the pool was full — and **refilled routinely** over decades — they didn't scramble.

They activated.

What Others Can Learn — Through the Pool Theory Lens

Many companies think about visibility in terms of 'when needed.'

But the best brands — like J&J — treat it as **routine maintenance**. Something that's *always on*.

What Johnson & Johnson did right:

- Stayed in front of the narrative, but never chased the spotlight
- Let their credibility speak louder than their marketing
- Built muscle memory around high-stakes messaging
- Focused on the **message**, not the moment

And perhaps most importantly — **they never let success make them complacent**.

The Pool Theory in Action

Some crises can't be avoided. But their impact can be managed — or even reversed — if a brand has already

built the systems, trust, and relationships to respond with strength and clarity.

Johnson & Johnson didn't dominate the vaccine race in terms of volume.

But in terms of brand trust? They weathered a high-risk environment with calm, competence, and credibility.

**The best time to get ready is before you're tested.
The second-best time is now.**

Chapter 6: The Routine – How to Stay Ready

By now, you understand the value of a full pool:

Clarity. Authority. Relationships. Crisis readiness.

But here's where most brands fall short — **they stop after the strategy.**

They launch a campaign, land a media hit, post a few updates, then... silence.

Building brand equity isn't about one big splash.

It's about the drip, drip, drip of consistent, strategic visibility.

That's why the most successful brands treat communication like a *practice*, not a project. They stay ready — even when things are calm — by sticking to a routine.

Not All Brand Activity Is Equal: Water vs. Movement

As you build your routine, it's important to understand that not every brand action contributes in the same way. Some actions **fill your pool** — they build lasting equity, trust, and authority. Others **create movement** — they keep you top-of-mind and signal to the outside world that you're active and relevant.

Both are necessary. But they serve different purposes.

What Fills the Pool: Depth & Credibility

These are the actions that add **volume** to your brand's trust reserve. They don't just get you noticed — they build authority that lasts:

- Giving a keynote at a major industry event
- Becoming the go-to expert in your local market — the one people refer to before they even need your service
- Being featured in a respected publication

- Joining a board of directors or winning a leadership award
- Publishing thoughtful content that earns backlinks and shares
- Building long-term partnerships with institutions, not just individuals

These moves are slower, but they're powerful. They create **depth** that strengthens your brand's foundation — even when you're not in the spotlight.

What Creates Movement: Visibility & Energy

Then there's the surface energy — the ripples.

These are lower-stakes, higher-frequency actions that keep you in motion:

- A social post that celebrates a team win
- Attending a local chamber event
- Commenting on another leader's insight
- Sharing a behind-the-scenes look at your workday
- Forwarding an article to your email list with a quick note

These actions don't necessarily deepen your brand's credibility, but they do keep you *relevant* and *visible*. They create rhythm. They tell your network: "We're engaged. We're here. We're moving."

Why You Need Both

A brand that only makes ripples but has no depth? That's noise.

A brand that's credible but invisible? That's missed opportunity.

The most trusted leaders, founders, and companies **do both**. They stay in motion with intention — while also investing in the activities that expand and refill their pool.

One LinkedIn post a week? Movement.

A podcast feature with real insight? Water.

A flashy event selfie? Movement.

An award for client impact? Water.

Routine keeps your ripples consistent.

Strategy ensures you're adding water, not just splashing around.

The Rhythm of Relevance

You don't need to be posting daily.

You don't need to dominate headlines.

You *do* need to show up regularly — in the places your audience actually pays attention.

Think of it like compound interest: small, steady actions that add up over time.

Here's what that might look like:

Weekly

- One post on your primary platform (e.g., LinkedIn, newsletter, blog)
- Commenting or engaging meaningfully with others in your space
- Internal message from leadership reinforcing key initiatives

Monthly

- Review press or speaking opportunities
- Share a case study, win, or insight
- Update stakeholders (clients, partners, or investors)

Quarterly

- Audit messaging alignment across website, bios, social, and decks
- Evaluate performance on key brand metrics
- Check in with key media or community relationships

- Create a fresh piece of thought leadership or longform content

This isn't about adding work — it's about creating a *sustainable system*.

For my clients in the corporate communications agency, we often build this into our client retainers — we become the engine behind their routine so that leadership can focus on strategy while the visibility takes care of itself.

If you're an expert, founder, or small business owner, you might do these actions yourself or employ an assistant to help.

What Consistency Looks Like in the Real World

- A real estate agent shares weekly market snapshots and neighborhood stories, staying top of mind with both past clients and future ones.
- A solar company posts once a week about industry updates, partnerships, and funding opportunities — consistently tying it back to their mission.
- A biotech CEO writes a monthly 'From the Desk of' update for investors and media contacts.
- A regional infrastructure firm shares quarterly insights about local projects and state funding activity — earning trust with decision-makers and

economic development teams.

None of them are flooding the feed but they're building something real: **a visible, confident brand presence that compounds with time.**

Burnout Is Not a Strategy

One of the biggest objections we hear is:

"We don't have time to do all this."

That's why the routine needs to fit your bandwidth.

It's better to **do less, consistently**, than to go big for three weeks and disappear.

Here are a few principles to keep your routine realistic:

- **Delegate what you can** – Use support staff, freelancers, or agencies (like ours) for writing, posting, or outreach.
- **Batch your work** – Create 4–6 posts or messages at a time and schedule them out.
- **Choose quality over quantity** – One sharp, thoughtful piece of content beats five filler updates.
- **Systemize your process** – Use a calendar or dashboard to track what's been shared, what's upcoming, and where gaps exist.

Your goal is to be *present*, not perfect.

Real-World Example: How a Government Affairs Firm Quietly Took the Lead

One of our clients — a **mid-sized government affairs company with decades of results behind the scenes** — came to us with a clear challenge: they had a strong track record, but almost no public visibility.

They weren't in crisis. They weren't losing clients.

But they were being **outpaced** by newer, flashier firms who posted frequently, spoke loudly, and showed up everywhere — even when the newer, flashier firms results didn't match.

Meanwhile, this client had **no blog, no social media, no press presence, and no consistent messaging**. Their work spoke for itself — but only to those already in the room.

And that was the problem.

They weren't building a pipeline. They weren't building authority. And they weren't showing future clients what made them different.

We Didn't Start Big — We Started Small

Rather than push them into a major rebrand or hire a PR firm, we built a system that was easy, authentic, and aligned with how they actually operated.

We helped them commit to three simple, sustainable monthly actions:

1. **Share one client win or industry insight** — with permission and a tone of credibility, not self-congratulation
2. **Send one short newsletter** to a curated list of stakeholders, prospects, and referral sources — reminding them who they are and what they're working on
3. **Post one LinkedIn update per week** highlighting recent work, team wins, or key policy developments — putting faces to the name

That was it.

No paid media. No daily content machine.

Just a routine.

The Results Came Quietly — and Powerfully

Within six months:

- They were fielding inbound leads from **larger corporate clients** who had 'seen their name pop up a few times'
- Their **credibility among peers grew** — they were invited to more roundtables, coalitions, and partner calls

- They had **secured new federal-level clients**, with several reaching the White House briefing stage
- Their internal team felt **more connected to the brand** and proud of the work being spotlighted
- Most importantly, they **stopped chasing attention** and started shaping it

They didn't just look active — they **sounded like a leader**.

The Pool Theory in Action

There was no rebrand. No gimmick. No viral moment.

This was about **routine visibility that aligned with actual authority** — shared consistently, clearly, and with intention.

They weren't in trouble when they came to us. But had they waited until something went wrong — a policy shift, a competitor's claim, a contract loss — there would've been nothing to draw from.

Instead, they **started showing up early**, with structure and voice.

And that made them **memorable before they were needed** — **not only when they were needed**.

That's the power of the pool.

Coming Up Next: Metrics That Actually Matter

So you've started showing up. But how do you know it's working?

In the next chapter, we'll cut through the noise and talk about what actually matters in brand performance — from vanity metrics to stakeholder trust — and how to track the health of your pool over time.

Worksheet: Your Pool Maintenance Calendar

This worksheet will help you design a consistent visibility and communications routine. Use it to assign recurring actions that keep your brand credible, clear, and visible.

Instructions:

1. Fill in at least one activity for each time interval below.
2. Assign ownership (who is responsible).
3. Schedule time monthly to review progress.

Weekly Activities

Example: Publish one LinkedIn post, comment on two industry updates, send internal message from leadership.

1. _____

Owner: _____

2. _____

Owner: _____

3. _____

Owner: _____

Monthly Activities

Example: Share a win, review speaking opportunities, send one stakeholder email.

1. _____

Owner: _____

2. _____

Owner: _____

3. _____

Owner: _____

Quarterly Activities

Example: Messaging audit, longform thought leadership, relationship check-in.

1. _____

Owner: _____

2. _____

Owner: _____

3. _____

Owner: _____

Reflection Prompt:

What time or task tends to get skipped first — and why?

What's one way to make this more sustainable or better supported?

Bonus Exercise: Water vs. Movement

Use this exercise to evaluate which of your routine activities are creating lasting brand value (water) versus maintaining visibility (movement).

You need both — but knowing which is which helps you focus your energy and balance your communications strategy.

WATER (Depth + Authority)

These actions build trust, credibility, and long-term brand equity.

Examples: Media feature, keynote, award, high-impact article, board membership, key relationship

List 3–5 things you’ve done (or could do) that add water:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

MOVEMENT (Visibility + Rhythm)

These actions keep your brand visible and top-of-mind.

Examples: Social post, newsletter, event attendance, shout-out, blog comment

List 3–5 things you’ve done (or could do) that create movement:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Reflection Prompt:

- Are your current activities weighted more toward water or movement?
- What’s one shift you can make to balance both sides better this quarter?

Real Brands, Real Lessons

When Visibility Isn't Enough: Peloton — From Darling to Doubt and Back Again

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, **Peloton** was the brand on everyone's lips.

The connected fitness company, once seen as a premium niche product for urban professionals, suddenly became a **global phenomenon**. Locked-down consumers wanted meaningful movement at home, and Peloton delivered more than just workouts — it offered **community, accountability, and lifestyle identity**. Instructors became celebrities. Social media was filled with Peloton stats, memes, and milestones. The waiting list for a bike stretched for weeks.

At the height of its momentum, Peloton's market capitalization soared past **\$50 billion**. Its marketing was polished, emotionally resonant, and ever-present. The company was widely seen as a model of direct-to-consumer brand building. And it wasn't just selling equipment — it was selling a belief system.

For all intents and purposes, **Peloton's pool was overflowing.**

But behind the scenes, cracks were forming.

From Growth to Overreach

Riding the wave of unprecedented demand, Peloton made a series of aggressive moves:

- It **over-forecasted long-term demand**, assuming the pandemic-fueled growth would become a permanent norm
- It **invested heavily in manufacturing infrastructure**, including acquiring a factory and increasing production capacity
- It **scaled operations rapidly**, expanding headcount, ad spend, and R&D without the systems needed for long-term rhythm and feedback

At the same time, Peloton's **metrics focused heavily on visibility and subscriber counts**, rather than sustainability, sentiment, and community health.

There was little room for nuance. The brand was sprinting. And when the cultural moment shifted, **Peloton wasn't ready to adjust.**

The Backlash Begins: A Series of Brand Hits

As lockdowns eased and gyms reopened, Peloton began to feel the pressure. Growth slowed. The backlog became a liability. Then came a series of damaging public moments:

- In December 2021, HBO's reboot of *Sex and the City* aired a now-infamous scene in which the character Mr. Big dies of a heart attack **immediately after a Peloton ride**. The scene went viral, and although fictional, it triggered a wave of concern and speculation about the brand's health implications.
- Peloton's **response came quickly but felt forced**—a hastily produced ad featuring Mr. Big actor Chris Noth trying to 'laugh off' the incident. Days later, Noth was accused of sexual assault, and the company had to pull the ad, making the situation even worse.
- The company faced **product recalls** on its Tread+ treadmill after multiple injuries and a child's death, further damaging public perception.
- Leadership instability followed. CEO John Foley stepped down, layoffs began, and Peloton lost nearly **90% of its market value** over a two-year span.

The brand hadn't just lost momentum — it lost control of its narrative.

Where the Pool Started to Dry Up

Peloton's visibility had never been higher — but visibility is not the same as trust. Nor is momentum a substitute for strategic, sustainable routine.

In many ways, **Peloton's brand routine had not matured with its audience or its scale.** What started as a tight, purpose-driven communications strategy became bloated, reactive, and overly focused on speed. Their internal feedback loops weren't built to process nuance. Leadership messaging lacked empathy during layoffs. Product launches felt disconnected from community needs.

The result wasn't total collapse. But it was a **public downgrade** of a brand once seen as untouchable.

The Foundation Still Held

Here's what makes Peloton's story different from a full-blown brand implosion: **they didn't disappear.**

Despite the setbacks, Peloton retained:

- A highly engaged, emotionally connected subscriber base
- Strong brand awareness and cultural relevance
- A valuable content platform and passionate instructor network
- A deep reservoir of goodwill among customers who *still wanted to believe*

That's the difference between hype and brand equity. Peloton had built **enough of a pool** — even if they neglected to maintain it — that it could survive the drought.

What Peloton Could Have Done Differently — Through the Pool Theory Lens

Peloton's brand was built fast and at high altitude. But with a better rhythm and routine, they could have prevented many of the deeper trust fractures.

What could have helped:

- **Clearer brand pacing:** A communications routine that emphasized reflection, thought leadership, and user success stories — not just product hype.
- **Metrics that measured sentiment, not just scale:** Including community trust, instructor connection, and narrative consistency.
- **More intentional crisis preparation:** Scenarios for reputation risk (including fictional portrayals and public image management), and a more measured PR playbook.
- **Leadership visibility rooted in empathy:** Peloton's founder was charismatic, but public responses lacked the emotional intelligence needed during recalls and layoffs.

The Pool Theory in Action — and Maintenance Mode

Peloton didn't fall because it was weak. It stumbled because it mistook **momentum for maintenance**.

Brand equity must be preserved, refilled, and rebalanced regularly. That means building systems of feedback, voice alignment, and brand storytelling that endure even when the cultural moment changes.

Peloton is still rebuilding. And because of the foundation it laid — even imperfectly — it has the chance to return.

The lesson is this:

You can fill your pool fast.

But if you don't watch the levels, test the structure, and refill with purpose — it won't last.

Chapter 7: Metrics That Actually Matter

When it comes to brand visibility and communications, we've trained ourselves to chase the wrong scoreboard.

- How many followers?
- How many likes?
- What's the reach?

Those metrics aren't useless — but they're *not the full picture*.

Because if 100,000 people see your content but no one trusts your leadership, or understands your value, **your pool isn't growing — it's leaking.**

In this chapter, we'll shift your mindset from **vanity metrics** to **value metrics** — the ones that tell you if your brand is actually *working* in the ways that matter most.

The Two Types of Brand Metrics

Think of your measurement system like this:

| Vanity Metrics | Value Metrics |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Follower count | Stakeholder engagement |
| Impressions | Content shares by ideal audience |
| Likes & views | Inbound referrals & invitations |
| Page visits | Time spent on page |
| Newsletter size | Open rate + direct replies |

Vanity metrics measure attention.

Value metrics measure *connection*.

And connection is what fills your pool.

Start With This Question: What Are We Trying to Influence?

Metrics only matter if they tie back to something meaningful.

So before you build a dashboard, ask:

Who are we trying to influence — and what action do we want them to take?

For example:

- If you're trying to win public contracts → Do decision-makers recognize and trust your company?
- If you're trying to attract investors → Is your leadership team seen as credible and compelling?
- If you're trying to build authority → Are people referencing, quoting, or inviting you into high-level conversations?
- If you're trying to gain local clientele → Do people in your community see you as the go-to expert and know what you offer without having to ask?

Those outcomes are measurable — but you have to *define them first*.

Three Signals Your Pool Is Growing

Here are three of the most powerful (but often overlooked), indicators that your communications are working:

1. You're being mentioned in the right rooms — without being in them.

- Clients mention seeing your CEO's article.
- A neighbor says, "I've seen your business pop up everywhere lately — what exactly do you do again?"
- A local chamber contact tags you in a thread before you even join the conversation.
- A reporter calls you directly for a quote.
- Partners reference your messaging in their own pitches.

That's not SEO. That's authority.

2. People respond to your content — in ways that lead somewhere.

- Not just likes, but real comments, replies, and DMs from relevant people.
- Not just "cool post," but "can we hop on a call?" from someone in your own zip code.
- A referral lands in your inbox with the subject line: 'You've got to talk to this person — I follow them on LinkedIn.'

- Not just open rates, but forwards, shares, and invitations that follow.

That's not hype. That's influence.

3. Stakeholders are more aligned — and stay longer.

- Your assistant knows what kind of opportunities to flag because the messaging is clear and consistent.
- Your long-time customers become informal ambassadors — tagging, recommending, and defending your brand.
- Employees cite your messaging in conversations.
- Board members refer to your public communications in meetings.
- Clients stick with you through price changes, pivots, or growing pains.

That's not reach. That's retention.

My Approach to Measurement

I encourage clients to build lightweight, focused dashboards using a mix of quantitative and qualitative metrics. A few things we track regularly include:

- Media mentions in strategic outlets
- Backlinks and SEO ranking for core message themes

- Share of voice vs. competitors
- Inbound partnership or investor inquiries
- Engagement from key personas (e.g., state officials, press, buyers)
- Internal confidence — measured by employee surveys or exec input
- Monthly Authority Score (a 1–10 rating across clarity, credibility, and consistency)

We don't drown in data. We focus on **meaningful movement**.

Real-World Example: A Construction Company Rebuilds Its Reputation — and Its Visibility

One of our clients, a **family-owned construction company with more than 20 years of success**, came to us during a period of both crisis and transition. Known for their quality workmanship and longstanding client relationships, the business had grown steadily over the years — but had never focused much on **brand visibility or community presence**.

That changed quickly after a tragic accident.

A company vehicle, clearly marked with their logo, was involved in a road incident where an employee **accidentally struck a bicyclist**. The incident made the local

news. Both the **driver's name and the company name** were mentioned in early coverage. Even though the team cooperated fully with investigators and responded responsibly, the damage was already done.

Leads slowed. Community trust faltered. Referrals dried up.

The company had been excellent at its work — but had done little to tell that story publicly. When the crisis hit, there was no pool to draw from.

At the Same Time, a Leadership Shift Was Underway

The incident also coincided with a **generational handoff** — the founder was passing the reins to his son, who had a fresh vision for the business. It was a chance to reset not just the management structure, but the **entire brand presence**.

We partnered with them to reestablish their identity from the inside out.

The goal wasn't just damage control — it was to **lay a foundation for future trust, community connection, and visibility**.

What We Changed

We helped them restructure their brand communications around three measurable priorities:

1. **Positive visibility in local and regional media** — not about apologizing, but **about showing up for the community**, including coverage of their volunteer projects, safety innovations, and workforce development work.
2. **Local lead generation** from higher-trust channels — shifting away from broad online ads toward relationship-based marketing with real community touchpoints.
3. **Leadership presence and storytelling** — positioning the new CEO as the next-generation builder focused on transparency, safety, and integrity.

What Happened Next

Within six months, the company had:

- Earned multiple features in local press — not about the incident, but about **positive, forward-looking community work**
- Begun rebuilding its referral pipeline through new partnerships with schools, suppliers, and neighborhood groups
- Increased **qualified local leads by over 40%** — without spending more on ads
- Seen **internal morale and public perception recover**, thanks to consistent, confident, and aligned messaging

They didn't need more marketing. They needed a **narrative shift**, rooted in who they really were — and a new rhythm for how they showed up.

The Pool Theory in Action

This story wasn't about likes or impressions. It was about **building authority and visibility that aligned with values** — and doing it with enough intention to weather scrutiny and spark growth.

Because when the pool is shallow, even a single incident can feel like a flood. But when it's full — even hard moments become part of a longer, stronger brand story.

Coming Up Next: Tracking the Pool Over Time

In the final worksheet, you'll create your **Brand Health Tracker** — a simple, visual tool to track key indicators that matter to your brand, your goals, and your pool.

Because when you measure what matters, you don't just *feel* ready.

You *know* you are.

Worksheet: Brand Health Tracker

Use this worksheet to track the most important metrics tied to your brand authority and pool strength. Revisit this tracker monthly or quarterly to measure meaningful progress.

Instructions:

1. Define your top 3–5 Value Metrics below.
2. Add current benchmarks and your desired targets.
3. Rate your progress each month or quarter.
4. Reflect on wins, gaps, and next actions.

Your Key Brand Metrics

Metric 1: _____

Current: _____ Target: _____

Progress Notes:

Metric 2: _____

Current: _____ Target: _____

Progress Notes:

Metric 3: _____

Current: _____ Target: _____

Progress Notes:

Metric 4 (optional): _____

Current: _____ Target: _____

Progress Notes:

Metric 5 (optional): _____

Current: _____ Target: _____

Progress Notes:

Reflection Prompt:

- What surprised you this quarter?
- Which metric showed the most meaningful progress?
- What's one action to take or delegate before the next review?

Real Brands, Real Lessons

When the Scoreboard Lies: Boeing and the 737 Max Crisis

For most of its history, **Boeing** was more than a household name — it was a trusted symbol of American engineering, global air travel, and innovation. Airlines relied on Boeing aircraft. Passengers felt safe boarding them. Governments partnered with the company. Shareholders saw steady returns.

By the mid-2010s, Boeing was locked in a fierce competitive race with Airbus, and the pressure to outperform led to the fast-tracking of its newest commercial aircraft: the **737 Max**.

What followed was one of the most devastating brand collapses in modern business — not because the product

failed, but because **the company lost control of its narrative, its voice, and its trust.**

Before the Storm: A Brand That Took Trust for Granted

Boeing had long operated with deep industry trust. Its name stood for reliability, safety, and operational excellence. But by the late 2010s, a shift had occurred — **internally, the focus moved away from safety and long-term trust toward production schedules, cost efficiency, and shareholder value.**

While those metrics made sense on paper, they came at the expense of deeper brand values.

- Engineers raised concerns internally about software flaws in the new **MCAS system**, but they were ignored or downplayed.
- Safety features became **optional add-ons**, not standard equipment.
- Pilots received **limited training** on new systems to avoid delays and reduce costs.
- Externally, Boeing's messaging remained largely transactional and defensive — **the company had no clear public voice of empathy, accountability, or transparency.**

The brand wasn't communicating poorly. **It wasn't communicating at all.** The pool was running dry and there

was no movement. And when tragedy struck, that silence would cost them dearly.

During the Crisis: The Narrative Took Off Without Them

In **October 2018**, Lion Air Flight 610 crashed shortly after takeoff, killing 189 people. Less than five months later, **Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302** went down with 157 lives lost. Both involved the 737 Max. Both pointed to MCAS system failures. And both ignited fear and scrutiny across the globe.

Boeing's response was **slow, legalistic, and robotic**:

- It failed to immediately acknowledge fault or demonstrate empathy.
- Executives issued statements that read more like risk disclaimers than human responses.
- The CEO's interviews and testimonies were flat, filled with jargon and corporate defensiveness.
- There was no trusted public face to contextualize the situation for the flying public.

The result was a **global grounding** of the 737 Max, plunging stock prices, and a tidal wave of reputational loss.

The Breakdown: Misaligned Metrics and a Missing Message

While Boeing was tracking production timelines, delivery speed, and shareholder returns, the public was asking completely different questions:

- Is this plane safe?
- Do Boeing's leaders care?
- Can we trust them to fix this?

The answer, for many, was “no.”

And the problem wasn't just technical. **It was narrative.**

Boeing had spent years measuring performance — but not **perception.**

They had tracked financials — but not **trust.**

So when the brand came under pressure, there was **no reservoir of goodwill** to slow the descent.

After the Storm: A Slow and Painful Rebuild

In the years that followed, Boeing began the long process of rebuilding its pool:

- It made **sweeping changes to leadership**, including replacing the CEO.
- It restructured safety reporting and culture internally.

- It began **prioritizing communication with regulators**, pilots, and airlines.
- It adjusted performance incentives to reflect **safety and accountability**, not just speed.
- It slowly began returning the 737 Max to service — with a far more public-facing tone.

But the road was long, and the damage ran deep.

The brand that once symbolized safety and trust had become a cautionary tale.

What Boeing Could Have Done Differently — Through the Pool Theory Lens

If Boeing had applied *The Pool Theory*, they might have prevented—or at least softened—the crisis by preparing their communications and public trust *before* disaster struck.

What might have changed:

- Regular, transparent communication about innovation, training, and safety updates.
- Leadership visibility and empathy — **building familiarity before pressure**.
- Internal systems for aligning engineering concerns with public messaging and product strategy.

- Thought leadership that positioned Boeing as a partner in aviation safety — not just a manufacturer.

In short: **a deeper, more intentional investment in the pool.**

The Pool Theory in Action — or Absence

Boeing is still here. But its brand has changed.

- What was once automatic trust is now earned slowly.
- What used to be industry reverence is now public skepticism.

The brand didn't collapse because it failed once. It collapsed because it hadn't built the cushion of trust needed to survive the failure.

When a company forgets to maintain the pool, the consequences can't be managed with engineering alone.

Conclusion: Your Pool Is Your Power

By now, you've seen what separates brands that panic from those that perform.

You've read stories of companies who built their foundation early — and those who waited too long.

You've explored the mechanics of visibility, voice, relationships, crisis readiness, routines, and measurement.

But here's the most important truth of all:

Your pool isn't about being popular.

It's about being prepared.

It's about filling your lead funnel consistently, and at will, because you have the direct communication with your current and potential clients.

When the spotlight hits — whether it's opportunity or adversity — you won't have time to build trust.

You'll only have what you've already built.

And that's where your power lies.

This Isn't About Perfection. It's About Practice.

The best brands in the world are not flawless. They've made mistakes, had off days, missed a beat.

But they have systems. They have alignment. They have routines.

They show up *even when no one's watching* — so when everyone is, they're ready.

Your goal isn't to be everywhere.

It's to be intentional, consistent, and credible in the spaces that matter to *your* audience.

That's the essence of The Pool Theory.

Where Do You Go From Here?

If you've worked through the worksheets and reflection prompts, you now have:

- A clearer sense of your current visibility
- Defined message pillars and authority statement
- A map of your key relationships
- A basic crisis plan
- A communication rhythm you can sustain
- Metrics that track actual brand health

You're already ahead of 90% of companies — many of whom don't think about any of this until it's too late.

But this isn't a finish line.

It's a launchpad.

Ready to Build Your Pool? Start Here.

If this book resonated with you, you already understand the core truth: **brand trust can't be built overnight — and it shouldn't be left to chance.**

But knowing that is only the beginning. Implementing it? That's where many leaders get stuck.

Whether you need a full communications partner, strategic guidance, or a self-paced plan — *we've built the tools to help you stay ready.*

If you need help, I'm here with multiple paths forward:

- **Download the free worksheets and tools** from this book to get you started at thepooltheory.com

- A comprehensive **eCourse** that walks you through each element of The Pool Theory step by step so you can build a pool and fill with movement
- **One-on-one coaching** to clarify your authority, message, and communications rhythm, and keep you accountable
- And for businesses ready to go all in — our team can provide **done-for-you strategy and execution**, becoming an extension of your brand

The first step?

Start with the free worksheets. They'll help you assess your pool, sharpen your visibility, and spot where to begin — right now, with what you already have.

Because in the end, **you don't need to be everywhere.**

You just need to be ready — in the right places, at the right time.

And we'd be honored to help you get there.

Final Words: Fill It Now. Not When You're Thirsty.

You don't buy insurance during the fire.

You don't start training after the race begins.

You don't build a pool *after* the heat rises.

You fill it early.

Quietly.

Strategically.

That's what The Pool Theory is all about.

Now you know what to do.

Start filling.

Worksheet: Quarterly Pool Check-In

Use this template every 90 days to reflect on your brand visibility, authority, and relationship strength. This will help you maintain momentum and make timely adjustments.

Instructions:

1. Set a calendar reminder to complete this every quarter.
2. Review your communications activity, stakeholder relationships, and key metrics.
3. Identify 1–2 focus areas for the next 90 days.

1. Brand Visibility

What channels have we been consistently active on?

What messages have been most effective or well-received?

Where have we gone quiet that needs attention?

2. Authority & Thought Leadership

What new content or thought leadership have we published?

Have we stayed aligned with our message pillars?

What feedback or inbound activity have we received from key audiences?

3. Relationships

Which relationships did we strengthen this quarter?

Any lost opportunities or neglected contacts?

New relationship goals for the next 90 days:

4. Key Metrics Review

Most improved metric:

Metric showing signs of concern:

General brand health rating this quarter (1-10):

5. Focus Areas

What's one area to prioritize or improve?

Who owns this area and what's the next step?

Real Brands, Real Lessons

Closing the Loop: Netflix and the Power of Rebuilding the Pool

In 2011, **Netflix** was growing fast. It had successfully disrupted the DVD rental space, embraced early streaming technology, and had a loyal customer base that saw it as an innovative, user-friendly alternative to brick-and-mortar video stores.

Then it made a move that nearly broke the brand.

That year, Netflix announced it would **split its DVD-by-mail and streaming businesses into two separate services**. The streaming platform would remain Netflix, while the DVD business would become a new company called **Qwikster**. In addition, the company introduced a **new pricing model** that charged separately for both services, effectively

raising prices for users who previously had access to both under one subscription.

The reaction was swift and brutal.

- Customers were confused and frustrated.
- Media outlets mocked the Qwikster name and strategy.
- Netflix lost over **800,000 subscribers in one quarter** — its largest drop ever.
- The company's stock price **plunged nearly 80%** in just a few months.
- CEO Reed Hastings issued a video apology that, while sincere, landed awkwardly with customers who felt blindsided.

For many companies, this kind of brand misstep would have been existential. But Netflix didn't disappear. It **rebuilt — strategically, methodically, and with a long view.**

What Netflix Did Right — After Getting It Wrong

Netflix made a critical mistake — not just in product strategy, but in communication. The company had failed to explain *why* it was making the changes, how customers would benefit, or what the long-term vision looked like.

But instead of spinning the narrative or blaming the market, Netflix chose a different route: **accountability and evolution**.

Over the next several years, it quietly and consistently took steps to refill its pool and continued to create movement:

- It **publicly acknowledged the error**, rescinding the Qwikster plan and recommitting to a unified product experience.
- It **invested deeply in customer communication**, improving transparency around pricing, product changes, and content strategy.
- It **shifted its messaging tone**, moving from reactive to thoughtful, grounded in data and long-term vision.
- It **pivoted from distributor to creator**, launching original content like *House of Cards* and *Orange is the New Black*, which helped redefine Netflix not just as a utility, but as a **cultural tastemaker**.
- It **refined its stakeholder narrative**, helping investors, media, and consumers understand how data-driven content, global expansion, and platform technology would support the next phase of growth.

In short: Netflix stopped chasing hype and started communicating like a company with a long runway and a full pool.

By 2020, the Brand Was Unrecognizable — In the Best Way

Less than a decade after the Qwikster debacle, Netflix had transformed from a misunderstood hybrid business into **one of the most powerful media brands on Earth.**

- It had surpassed **200 million global subscribers.**
- Its original shows and films were winning Emmys, Oscars, and setting viewing records.
- It was influencing culture, politics, and global storytelling in ways few tech companies had ever done.

And none of that success came from a single ad campaign or clever rebrand. It came from **a long-term commitment to brand clarity, routine communication, and a relentless focus on rebuilding trust.**

The Final Lesson: You Can Always Refill the Pool — If You Start Now

Netflix is proof that even strong brands will stumble. But if the values are real, the audience is listening, and the work is consistent — trust can be restored.

This comeback didn't happen in a boardroom or in a rebrand pitch deck. It happened **through discipline, humility, and a willingness to evolve in public.**

That's the essence of *The Pool Theory*.

You can't build brand resilience in the moment you need it. But you *can* build it today — through alignment, visibility, relationships, and reputation maintenance.

Because the question isn't whether your brand will be tested. It's **when**.

And when that time comes, will your pool be full?

The Last Word: Build It Now, Lead When It Matters

You've seen how brands rise — and how they fall. You've studied what makes some companies magnetic, trusted, and resilient — and why others disappear when pressure hits.

The truth is simple: **every brand is building something.** Some are building trust. Some are building confusion. Some are building momentum. Some are building excuses.

Only one of those will hold up when the spotlight hits.

The Pool Theory isn't a concept. **It's a commitment.** To show up clearly. To show up early. To stay visible and valuable — long before you're "ready" or "big enough."

Because your reputation isn't created the day you need it. It's created in the weeks, months, and quarters beforehand — by the actions you take, the messages you share, and the relationships you maintain.

So here's **the final truth** I want you to walk away with:

- You don't need a bigger budget. You need a braver rhythm.
- You don't need a viral moment. You need visible, steady momentum.
- You don't need to be perfect. You need to be present.
- You don't need to go it alone. But you do need to start.

So start.

- Post something useful this week.
- Refine your message pillars.
- Reconnect with someone in your audience.
- Send that email.
- Own your voice.
- Be the leader people recognize before the crisis — and remember after it.

We built this book, this framework, and the accompanying tools to make that process easier.

And if you need help, we're here — whether it's through self-paced tools, coaching, or partnership.

But no matter how you move forward — **just move.**

Because the only wrong pace is standing still. And the only real mistake is waiting until you're thirsty to build the pool.

Take the Next Step: Download Your Pool Theory Tool Kit

You've done the reading — now it's time to *do the work*.

The Pool Theory isn't just a framework. It's a practice. And to make it stick, you need tools that turn insights into action.

That's why we've created a full **digital worksheet bundle** based on the exercises in this book — so you can revisit, revise, and build your brand momentum over time.

Inside the Tool Kit Bundle:

- ✓ Visibility self-assessment
- ✓ Message pillar builder
- ✓ Authority statement template
- ✓ Relationship mapping exercise
- ✓ Crisis readiness checklist
- ✓ Communications rhythm planner
- ✓ Quarterly brand health tracker

These tools are printable, fillable, and designed to keep your communications clear, consistent, and aligned — whether you're running a solo business, a growing team, or a public brand.

► **Download them now at thepooltheory.com**

Make it real.
Make it visible.
Make it last.

Because building trust isn't a one-time project — it's a rhythm.

Author's Biography

Tiffany Muehlbauer is the founder and CEO of Arma Communications, a boutique corporate communications agency that helps businesses communicate with clarity, confidence, and authority. She wrote *The Pool Theory*, a modern framework for brand visibility that challenges companies to stop waiting for the perfect moment to speak—and instead stay in motion through consistent, authentic outreach.

With over two decades of experience working with public and private companies, Tiffany specializes in building brand momentum through proactive, integrated communication strategies. She believes that in today's fast-moving landscape, brands that wait for a crisis to speak up are already too late.

The Pool Theory is rooted in her core belief: visibility is stability. Tiffany's work spans sectors like infrastructure, technology, transportation, and energy—but her message applies to every leader who wants to build trust before they need it, stand out with intention, and create movement that protects their brand when it matters most.

“The Pool Theory should be required reading for every executive who has ever said, “We’ll deal with that when the time comes. ... Trust, visibility, and authority must be earned before the spotlight hits...”

“The Pool Theory cuts through with clarity. It’s not just about crisis PR – It’s about building a brand that people believe in when it counts.”

The Pool Theory is a multi-decade proven program of getting and staying ahead of the PR curve, in an authentic and genuine way such that your customers, stakeholders, and the public believe you when you speak and act when the chips are down for your company.

For some companies, a disaster sinks the company; for others, it is a temporary setback. Why? The Pool Theory explains why and how to be one of the companies who survive and thrive after a disaster, and not one that fades into obscurity, or worse, bankruptcy.

If you wait until something bad happens, it is too late to marshal the forces of the public and customers in your favor. It is an ongoing program to create and keep positive reserves, which we call water in the Pool.

Tiffany Muehlbauer is the founder of Arma Communications, a boutique PR agency. With 20+ years in marketing, she helps brands build visibility before crisis hits. Her signature philosophy teaches that momentum protects reputation – and that proactive communication isn’t optional, it’s essential. Visibility is stability. Tiffany helps brands lead with both.
