

Orgasmic Leadership

Profiting from the Coming Surge in Women's Sexual Health and Wellness*



Rachel Braun Scherl



EVERYTHING I KNOW I LEARNED AS A VAGIPRENEUR

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Table of Contents



SECTION 1

Why Should Anybody Care about “Lady Business”?	1
Chapter 1: Why the Women’s Sexual Health and Wellness Business Is Exploding	3
What’s Good for the Gander Is...Banned for the Goose?	10
Chapter 2: My Journey as a Vagipreneur.	15
We Didn’t Know What We Didn’t Know.	19
No Time Outs.	23
No Substitutions	27
The Women’s Sexual Health and Wellness Industry Is Growing	31

SECTION 2

The Female Sexual Satisfaction Marketplace Is on the Edge of Exploding	35
Meet the Vagipreneurs.	43
Chapter 3: Technology: Delivering Women’s Sexual Health and Wellness through Technical Solutions	47
Lisa Levin: Former Marketing Director, Veru Health Care	48
Karen Long: Cofounder, Nuelle, Inc.	53
Holly Rockweiler: Cofounder and CEO, Madorra	58
Chapter 4: Distribution: Bringing More Products to More Women in More Places	65
Janet Kraus: CEO and Cofounder, peach	66
Suhani Jalota: Founder, Myna Mahila Foundation	72
Jordana Kier: Cofounder, LOLA Tampons	77
Chapter 5: Business Models: Transforming the Women’s Health Space through Reimagined Approaches to the Marketplace	83
Tracy Warren: Founder, Astarte Ventures.	85

Cindy Gallop: Founder, Make Love Not Porn	90
Polly Rodriguez: Founder and CEO, Unbound, and Cofounder, Women of Sex Tech	98
Chapter 6: Creative Solutions: Finding Better Products for Existing Problems	109
Colette Courtion: CEO and Cofounder, Joylux, Inc.	112
Alexandra Fine: CEO and Cofounder, Dame Products	117
Wendy Strgar: Founder, Good Clean Love	121
Chapter 7: Education: Maximizing Women’s Sexual Health and Fulfillment through Knowledge	127
Betty Dodson, PhD: Pioneering Author and Women’s Sex Educator.	130
Rachel Brem, MD: Breast Cancer Specialist and Chief Medical Advisor, The Brem Foundation; and Andrea Wolf: President and CEO, The Brem Foundation	135
Pamela Madsen: Sexual Fulfillment Coach.	141
Chapter 8: Social Impact: Changing the World, One Female at a Time	147
Miki Agrawal: Founder, THINX Period Panties	148
Meika Hollender: Cofounder and Co-CEO, Sustain.	155
Bethany Edwards: Cofounder and CEO, Lia Diagnostics, Inc.	159
 SECTION 3	
Coming Attractions	165
Chapter 9: Future Business Trends in Women’s Sexual Health and Wellness	167
Chapter 10: Spotting Trends	171
Evaluating Opportunities in the White Space	171
About the Author	179
Acknowledgments.	181
References.	185

Praise for *Orgasmic Leadership*



“Orgasmic Leadership is a wonderfully insightful and incredibly relatable read on so many levels for the professional woman, working mom multi-tasker, looking for entrepreneurial knowledge, know-how and optimism to lean in to the women’s health and wellness business.”

Dr. Alyssa Dweck, award winning gynecologist, voted “Top Doctor” in *New York Magazine* and in Westchester County, co-author of 3 books: *The Complete A to Z for your V*, *The Sexual Spark*, and *V is for Vagina*

“A market-maker in the multi-billion-dollar global women’s sexual health marketplace, Rachel Braun Scherl is serious about smashing stereotypes and revealing inequities. Her super power is her passion, persistence, and perseverance on behalf of this huge, yet undervalued business opportunity.”

Amy Millman, Co-Founder and President, Springboard Enterprises

“I am very impressed with Rachel’s domain expertise, marketing chops and leadership. I’ve referred her to CEOs who could benefit from her wisdom, lessons learned and new vocabulary for FemTech. This book is essential reading for any “vagipreneur” and useful for all female entrepreneurs. Rachel tackles taboo topics with a delightful sense of humor. I’m sure you’ll laugh out loud at times like I did.”

Lauren Flanagan, Managing Partner, BELLE Capital USA; Partner, BiteSize Solutions

“Orgasmic Leadership is a unique resource for women’s sexual health and wellness—the first of its kind addressing all those silent concerns now out in the open.”

Marsha Firestone, Ph.D. President & Founder, Women Presidents’ Organization

“With Orgasmic Leadership, Rachel reminds us of two of my favorite topics, the power of female entrepreneurs and the importance of women’s sexual health. Through her candid stories, probing interviews, and thought leadership she inspires us to think differently and never to give up our dreams for ourselves or our daughters.”

Lisa Kent, Founder of The Luminations Group and author of *Inspiring Innovation*

“Rachel Braun Scherl is a smart, fearless, female leader. She makes the complex, simple. Rachel can see a path forward, even when others may be having a hard time finding the way. This book is a must read for all women, who are seeking to be and do great in their careers.”

Alissa Kaplan, Executive Director at J. Walter Thompson

“Orgasmic Leadership is a game-changing read for women who want to get in the mix, make things happen and change the conversation.”

Lee Woodruff, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *In an Instant*

“Rachel is one of a kind, a real force of nature and has luckily turned her prodigious talents towards female health. As a vagipreneur and a person of action, Rachel is making things happen.”

Kimberly Jenkins, Founder, Duke University Innovation and Entrepreneurship Initiative; Tech Executive (Microsoft, NeXT, Internet Policy Institute); Advocate, Mentor and Angel Investor for women-owned businesses

“What a great resource! Orgasmic Leadership provides the vocabulary to have a powerful conversation about the important business of women’s health. Rachel Braun Scherl’s unique voice shares business insights with intelligence, humor and passion.”

Sue Hawkes, bestselling author of *Chasing Perfection*

“Rachel Braun Scherl is a creative and driven business person. Her success in building women’s health businesses is a testament to her extraordinary imagination and persistence. As a speaker to MBA students and as a member of our university’s entrepreneurial community, she is frank and direct. She is a source of inspiration as well as actionable practical advice.”

Jon Fjeld, Executive Director, Center for Entrepreneurship & Innovation, The Fuqua School of Business at Duke University

“This book will empower you to challenge the conventional norms and help join the vagipeneur crusade to help clear a path to sexual vitality and equality.”

Michael Krychman, MD, Executive Director of the Southern California Center for Sexual Health and Associate Clinical Professor at University of California Irvine

“I recommend Orgasmic Leadership to every patient and listener of mine who wants better insight and options regarding their sexual and reproductive health options. Rachel speaks with a powerful voice about building businesses and creating sexual, personal and professional options. Each interview adds a new layer of practical understanding. A must read.”

Beatty Cohan, author of *For Better, For Worse Forever*, nationally recognized psychotherapist and sex therapist

“I meet leaders, both male and female, every day in the work I do. In Orgasmic Leadership, Rachel brings to life the characteristics and necessary mindset that I believe people need to be successful. And Rachel lives those qualities in her work and her life.”

Lindsay Mask, Founder and Executive Director of Ladies America, a global network of professional women

“Orgasmic Leadership provides a brave, honest, and enjoyable account of women’s experiences as entrepreneurs. Rachel demonstrates how one can rush headfirst into challenges, with passion and grace. If you want to learn about dynamic leadership, read this.”

Deborah Perry Piscione, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Secrets of Silicon Valley*

“Orgasmic Leadership shares inspirational stories of personal empowerment and professional transformation which is a treasure for every woman. My heartfelt respect, admiration and appreciation for Rachel Braun Scherl and all her sister entrepreneurs and vagipreneurs. These smart savvy women are changing the way we think, feel, and behave. Yay!”

Jackie Zeman, Emmy nominated TV actress

“When I started out as a medical journalist almost four decades ago, talking about colon cancer, prostates and, oh my, “lady bits” was not considered appropriate for the evening news. How times have changed, except for the part about “lady bits.” For some reason we still have hang-ups about women’s sexual health, much to the detriment of women everywhere. Finally, Rachel Braun Scherl has the courage to bring her passion and knowledge to educate and destigmatize discussions around female health and wellness. On behalf of men who want their female friends, lovers and partners to be healthy all over, thank you!”

Dr. Max Gomez, Emmy award winning medical correspondent and senior health editor for CBS

Dedication



“This above all: to thine own self be true.”

Polonius, Hamlet Act 1, Scene III

Dad, even now that you are gone, yours is the voice that I hear in my head—the one that I have always heard. It is the voice that has always tried to guide me how to live, how to love, how to care, how to be kind, how to do good, how to build relationships, how to cry (apparently with reckless abandon), and how to make people laugh. Every day, you are a strong presence in my life. I see pieces of you in your grandchildren every day.

Mom, thank you for teaching me never to give up, for always being my biggest, unwavering supporter. With your fervent desire to help solve problems, I learned how to forge a new path if the one in front of me was blocked. You taught me to believe in my value as a person, a mother, a sister, a family member, a professional—and in all of the other roles I play in my life. And you showed me how to celebrate joy and to laugh.

Being loved by you has made me feel brave, strong, and capable.

SECTION 1



**Why Should Anybody Care
about “Lady Business”?**

CHAPTER 1



Why the Women's Sexual Health and Wellness Business Is Exploding

“It’s supposed to be hard. If it wasn’t hard, everyone would do it. The ‘hard’ is what makes it great.”

—Tom Hanks as Jimmy Dugan, *A League of Their Own*

Would it shock you to know that I didn’t start my business career intending to become a “vaginal” crusader? When I was a child, I thought I might be a firefighter, a ballerina, an Olympic gymnast, or a figure skater, to name just a few options. I did not anticipate that after twenty-plus years as a marketer of pharmaceutical, consumer health, beauty, and wellness products, I would be in the *vagina* business, assuming a role, somewhat accidentally, as a warrior for women.

Today I speak to business leaders about the trials, tribulations, travesties, and triumphs I have experienced as a female executive fighting to bring awareness and easy access to women for products and services designed to meet a range of needs. I work directly with these companies to help them find creative ways to build these businesses.

That is my job. I am a Vagipreneur.

Wait. *What did I just say?*

Yes, I said Vagipreneur—a moniker I hold dear (thank you to the great journalist and creator of this unique job, Abby Ellin), which succinctly describes a person in the business of female sexual health and wellness. And today I say it boldly, without whispering, out in the open, loudly, where (gasp) *children* might hear me.

Well, not *purposely* near the children, but it happens from time to time.

That's by design. Because the biggest business challenge in female health is the one against uncomfortable silence; the discomfort with the conversation and, specifically, the lack of appropriate language to describe female sexuality in all its complex glory. I learned early on in this Vagipreneurial journey that once I made that proclamation and declared my role in this societal battle, it got (and remains) downright crazy—every man (and in my case, woman) for herself.

Until my daughter was twelve years old and my son was nine (they are now twenty-two and nineteen—yikes), I worked on businesses and products that frankly, didn't interest them. They knew Mommy was a consultant (whatever that meant). They knew Mommy's work took her to boring places that did not interest them, like Columbus, Houston, Denver, or Raleigh, as well as exciting places they could not picture, like Budapest, China, and Brazil.

Well, all of that benign disinterest on their part (and on the parts of lots of other people who seemed to nod off when they asked me what I did—*you know who you are*) changed when I became a Vagipreneur, cofounding and running a business that had a pioneering product to improve arousal, desire, and satisfaction for women of all ages and at all life stages.

Suddenly, Mommy's work became the subject of every conversation with anyone, anywhere, at any time, and not necessarily

in a time or place of my choosing—or theirs. Overnight, after years of a fair level of social disinterest in my career (a symptom that I had first noticed when I moved to the suburbs), I became extremely popular at dinner parties and girls' nights out. Despite my repeated comments that I was in the business of female health and not the delivery of care, women asked me questions as if I were a younger Dr. Ruth.

Now, at heart, I am a storyteller and salesperson. I am always up for engaging in, starting, and creating conversations that provide the important information that will lead to a sale. But I discovered there are literally unimaginable places, times, and contexts in which a Vagipreneur might hear about intimacy challenges. It seemed wherever I went and whatever I did, family members, friends, strangers, and even proverbial butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers were stalking me to ask questions. Very personal questions. *Seriously* personal questions. The questions were not only about the products I was working on, but more often than not, about each person's sexual challenges, victories, and knowledge gaps.

The questions were about everything and anything—relationships, positions, pains, waxing—nothing seemed to be out of bounds. *How does the product work? Why don't I have vaginal orgasms? How can I get in the mood when all I feel right now is fury because my husband doesn't help around the house?* (No product can fix that, as far as I know.) *Rachel, will this product help me stop thinking about my to-do list during sex?* (No kidding; we did research and women said that.) *You said this product is topical; does that mean I always have to be on top?* (No, I'm not even paraphrasing here.)

Did I mention (I know I did) that when I embarked on this chapter of my life, my kids were young and didn't necessarily need to

hear that a grown-up with whom we carpooled had hurt her pelvis with an uncommon, inventive, and clearly dangerous *move*?

Some of the details and questions I heard about people's lives were so personal, in some states they may have been illegal—more on that later. In all fairness and seriousness, you can't be taken seriously in female health without having developed some expertise given its importance, tons of data, and scores of details about women's sexual lives and responses. I *did* have a lot of information at my fingertips—about female sexual health, about how products work, about what folks in the medical field say, about new offerings on the horizon, about the results of clinical studies, about the options. You name it, I could and can talk about it. But I certainly didn't want to give lectures about the complexities of female sexual response and the multiple physiological and psychological systems at play while sitting in a friend's living room, watching the Super Bowl, with *my* kids and *their* kids sitting there.

Boundaries, people.

Still, I couldn't escape the questions. Neither could my impressionable children. The information seekers were everywhere.

For my children, I have always tried to provide age-appropriate, clear descriptions of what I did to arm them with facts. As the daughter of a therapist, I was trained to be a big fan of openness. I thought I was incredibly modern and forward-thinking as I talked with my children about intimacy, appropriate clinical names for body parts, love, marriage, and intercourse. I admit I started with the old, "when two people love each other very much, and they are married..." speech. At some point, and not recently, they clearly figured out that people had sex outside of marriage. I told them that physical intimacy is an important part of a relationship and

that, for a lot of reasons, sometimes women do not enjoy the experience as much as they want to. And that Mommy's company made a product that helps couples enjoy each other in that part of their relationships.

I was feeling quite proud of myself regarding the clarity and honesty of my parental communication—until my son said, “Oh I get what you do, Mommy. My autobiography could be called *Diary of a Pimpy Kid*.”

Let me tell you, your parental confidence cannot help but take a precipitous nosedive when one of your children thinks you are a pimp. And by the way, *how did he even know what a pimp was?* Clearly, I should have done a better job of monitoring his screen time; I was sure that at any minute, a child protective agency would swoop in and say that my children were living in an inappropriate (maybe even unsafe) environment.

But lest you think *that* was the most embarrassing point in my Vagipreneurial life, I promise you, it was just one of many (oh so many).

There was also one particularly memorable instance when I was minding my own business, playing with my daughter in a park, when an acquaintance (and I really do mean *just* an acquaintance) came up to us and whispered, “Do you have your car here?”

“Sure,” I answered. “Do you need a ride?”

“No,” she said. “I heard you have *stuff* in your car.”

OK, fabulous; now I was a pimp *and* a drug dealer. I could just feel the Mother-of-the-Year nominations rolling in.

And that was before the inevitable question from my daughter upon hearing this conversation. “Mommy, what do you have in your car?”

I admit it: I cracked under the pressure. “Hey,” I said enthusiastically, “Let's go have ice cream and french fries for dinner while we

watch TV. And maybe you can go to school late tomorrow.” Listen: sometimes you need to throw a Hail Mary pass.

Regardless of what I did for a living, my kids, like most, didn’t like it when I went on business trips. I remember their sweet little faces at the window, crying as I walked out with my black rolling bag, the international sign of child abandonment.

One day my Vagipreneurial work offered a bit of inspiration. I was staffing the phones, speaking to customers, as we required everyone in the company to do. During one call, a woman shared enthusiastically (OK, she was shouting), “This stuff really works. Thank you, God!” After that, when I had to go on business trips, I assured my children that I was out doing “God’s work.” Lesson: You use the tools you have at your disposal.

Both of my children switched schools the same year I bought the company. I would say these were unrelated events, but at their old schools, their friends knew about my new job, and their friends’ parents were my friends, so they *also* knew about my new job. I imagine that I am the only mother around who jokes that her children voluntarily entered the *Vagipreneur Protection Program*.

I developed a much thicker skin as the months and years went by, as did my kids. But those early months opened my eyes to several things.

First, a lot of women were eager to get their hands on the product and to open up about challenges in the bedroom—sometimes inappropriately eager, considering the age and proximity of our young bystanders. I sometimes felt as if I were at an out-of-control concert, in danger of being stampeded by a herd of desperate women. Second, and somewhat paradoxically, women didn’t immediately

leap at the opportunity to try the product without a bit of education and exploration about how it worked to enhance the experience of female sexuality in all of its complexity. And finally, it became clear that in American society, we don't actually have a ready vocabulary to discuss these matters in ways that work for many women.

We have all been schooled in the language of male sexual dysfunction, thanks to inescapable advertising. But words like "bigger," "longer," and "stronger" do not generally reflect how women talk and feel. And when I say that, I am not just offering a personal opinion. In my work, I have spoken to literally hundreds of women about their feelings, concerns, anxieties, and joys about sex. They have told me, without hesitation, that they do not look at sex as a performance activity, and therefore, many of those adjectives simply do not apply.

How do you have a conversation without a common vocabulary? How do you create interest in a discussion and options when the words available quickly devolve into territory that is unrelatable at best and prurient, unsavory, and disrespectful at worst? I could hardly be upset about my son's use of the word "pimp" when that word might show up in some of the top-ranked Google matches for "female sexual arousal" or "women's sexual enjoyment." The truth of the matter is, there is an exceedingly fine line between legitimate sexual health and wellness products and the other side of that proverbial line. Just look at cultural references we hear all the time. The Tony Award-winning best musical, *Avenue Q*, a play for grown-ups populated with Sesame-Street-like puppets, acknowledges "The Internet is for Porn" in an entire song of the same title (in which one of the puppets also sings, "Grab your dick

and double-click”)—and while one might question the combination of puppets and porn, the show has been touring the country to sold-out audiences since 2003.¹

And don’t get me started about a whole generation of young adults whose entire sexual education comes from watching online porn—a world of simultaneous orgasms and depictions of “erotic” violence. (On a serious note, *anything* is fair game between consenting adults.) Cindy Gallop, a dynamic advertising executive turned entrepreneur (whom I profile in this book), focuses on one of the most important questions in the conversation: *What happens when today’s total access to hardcore porn converges with our society’s equal total reluctance to talk openly and honestly about sex?* Her answer was to create MakeLoveNotPorn.tv, a site for user-generated content that bills itself as *Pro Sex. Pro Porn. Pro Knowing the Difference.*²

What’s Good for the Gander Is . . . Banned for the Goose?

You’ve seen the ads. You’ve heard them. On TV. In print. On the radio. Online. Everywhere. Anywhere. You can’t escape them. They come at you from all directions, in every possible medium.

By now, is there anybody alive in America who doesn’t know there’s a “little blue pill” for men that treats erectile dysfunction, or about the “four-hour erection?” Since its arrival on the market in 1998, few prescription drugs have entered the popular consciousness like Viagra. The sexual dysfunction medication was endorsed by the likes of former presidential candidate Bob Dole and international soccer star Pelé, and while these names may not carry much weight with millennials or Generation Z, they helped to usher the drug and the conversation about men’s sexual satisfaction into the mainstream.

¹ <https://www.allmusicals.com/lyrics/avenueq/theinternetisforporn.htm>.

² <https://talkabout.makelovenotporn.tv>.

Viagra ads, and ads for its fellow erectile dysfunction drugs, penetrated our consciousness so deeply and thoroughly that late-night comedians can still riff on “erections lasting four hours” and *everybody* knows exactly what ads—and which products—are being discussed, even if they aren’t specifically named. Eventually, other erectile dysfunction pharmaceuticals, like Cialis and Levitra, took their place beside “The Big V.”

Cialis created instantly iconic print ads with consenting adults sitting side-by-side in matching his-and-hers bathtubs in a green, grassy meadow—as do we all, from time to time, don’t we? (Seriously, *what is with those bathtubs?* Philosophically, I think I get it; the tubs are symbols of relaxing, taking your time, not hurrying. Sure, a bath is more relaxing and indulgent than a quick shower. And I believe that the Cialis advertising team was trying to create a warmer, gentler, more inviting positioning for their product than ads for Viagra—more feminine, as it were. However, in all my years on this planet, I have yet to see or hear of a couple dragging clawfoot bathtubs to the beach, getting in them, and watching the sunset.)

When I speak to people about this category, I often start with a query to demonstrate the chasm that exists between male and female vocabularies around this topic. I ask, “Who is looking for a partner with a four-hour erection? Raise your hands high.” As you might expect, I generally don’t see too many hands go up. And I have yet to find the woman who emphatically says, “Me! *That* is what I am looking for!”

But money talks and business is business. The global erectile dysfunction market is expected to reach nearly \$4.25 billion by 2022, according to a 2016 study by Research and Markets, so it’s no surprise that marketers and advertisers are eager to get the word out

about products they've developed to help the men suffering from the problem.³ Globally, the advertising spend for erectile dysfunction products exceeds \$300 million annually. And by the way, estimates suggest that as many as 50 percent of users take the product for performance *enhancement*, as opposed to treatment for actual sexual dysfunction (not that there is anything wrong with that).

And yet.

Men are objectively *not* the only people who suffer from sexual arousal, concerns, difficulties, and disorders. Not by a long shot.

In 2008, my longtime and adored business partner, Mary Wallace Jaensch, and I created Semptrae Laboratories, Inc. with a venture capital partner. Given Mary's incredible background and experience before me (Mt. Holyoke, Yale School of Management, and Procter & Gamble, to name a few) as well as with me, we just assumed that we had the combined grit, skill, and passion to build this company. And so forward march we went. We built the company by women, for women (*funded* by women partners at venture capital firms), focusing on marketing Zestra Essential Arousal Oils—a safe, nonhormonal, topical product targeted at women's sexual arousal and satisfaction. We believed we'd hit the motherlode. In America alone, an estimated 43 percent of women (30 million at that time) reported some form of female sexual dysfunction (FSD), which is clinically defined as persistent and recurrent problems with sexual response, desire, orgasm, or pain that distresses the woman or causes strain in her relationship with her partner.⁴

³ Research and Markets. "Erectile Dysfunction Market - Global Outlook and Forecast 2018-2023." *Research and Markets - Market Research Reports - Welcome*, 13 Feb. 2018, www.researchandmarkets.com/research/kwz4rc/global_erectile?w=4.

⁴ Laumann, Edward O., A. Paik, and RC Rosen. "Sexual Dysfunction in the United States: Prevalence and Predictors." *JAMA*. February 10, 1999. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/188762>.

Zestra had already been clinically tested in a placebo-controlled, double-blind study for safety and efficacy. That's a pharmaceutical study model, even though Zestra was classified as a cosmetic rather than a drug. The study had found Zestra increased arousal, feelings of arousal, desire, feelings of desire, and satisfaction for women of all ages and life stages. The clinical evidence indicated that it worked for seven out of ten women (I might also add, we heard from customers that it was "life-changing" for about four in ten). Formulated from a patented blend of botanical oils and plant extracts that increased the sensitivity of nerve endings to increase deep, pleasurable sensations, Zestra seemed positioned to explode in the marketplace.

What could possibly go wrong? We had a plan, funding, relevant experience, drive, and an amazing product. Zestra was a topically applied product, with no known drug/drug interactions, used on demand, and it didn't lose effectiveness after repeated usage. The product included no parabens, glycerin, or hormones. And there was no other product on the market that performed the same way and could make such significant claims about such an important topic.

Once we refined the packaging, product, and marketing message (the stuff we had spent our careers doing), we were off to the races. We believed in the product, and we thought all it would take to succeed would be getting the word out. It worked for Viagra and the like: why not Zestra? *Sounds easy*, right?

Based on our decades of experience marketing pharmaceuticals and health and wellness products and building a successful business as partners, not to mention tons of Zestra-specific market research including nineteen sets of focus groups, two statistically projectable quantitative studies which included hundreds and hundreds of women, and the overwhelming response of friends and

acquaintances, we knew we had something special on our hands. The existing market for women's lubricants alone was \$200 million, and this product had the opportunity to do so much more.

What could possibly go wrong?

Much to our amazement, it wasn't long before we felt like Tom Hanks as Jim Lovell in *Apollo 13*: "Houston, we have a problem."