

A HANDBOOK

The Ekram Method

Positioning and Narrative for Technology

A faithful reconstruction of the work of **Ekram** @ekrahm

SOMO · @SOMONAUT

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FRONT MATTER – F1

Origins & Lineage

“Position or be positioned.”

– EKRAM

Where this method comes from

This book has one source and one author behind it: Ekram (@ekrahm), the technology industry’s top positioning strategist who works at the frontier of crypto and AI. In his words, “reorganizing institutions, power, and what becomes inevitable.” His own description of his job is narrow and exact — he works on the positioning layer — and he was, by his account, trained under Steve Jobs’ strategist, Andy Cunningham, the person who helped launch the Macintosh.

The method itself was never written down as a method. It lives scattered across three places:

his blog at ekram.xyz (a set of tightly-argued “Notes” plus longer essays), his writing on X, and his talks — most notably a widely-referenced go-to-market keynote built around the rise of the modular-blockchain category. Read in isolation, each piece is a sharp observation. Read together, they turn out to be a single, coherent system for deciding what a company means in the market’s mind, and then making that meaning inevitable.

This handbook is the act of reading them together. It gathers the scattered body of work into one ordered method, in the sequence the ideas actually depend on each other.

What this book is — and isn’t

This is a faithful reconstruction, not an interpretation.

The primary source is Ekram’s own words. Where this book quotes him, the quote is his.

Where it teaches a concept, the concept is his. The book’s contribution is everything around the ideas: the sequence (which idea has to come before which), the teaching apparatus (the worked examples, the common mistakes, the “apply it” steps, the recall questions), and a handful of organizing frames built to hold the whole thing together.

Two of those frames are the book's, not his, and are flagged as such wherever they appear: the legible → desirable → inevitable triad used to define marketing's job, and the chapter architecture that runs from position to delivery. They are scaffolding for his method, not additions to it.

The book also holds one standard above all others: honest lineage. Every chapter carries a short Lineage note that separates what Ekram inherited from what he sharpened or coined.

Inherited ideas are credited to the people who originated them. Reconstructed or extended material is labeled as such. The goal is that a reader always knows whose idea they're holding.

The shoulders it stands on

Ekram's method is a synthesis, and it is honest about that. It stands on a specific intellectual lineage:

- Al Ries & Jack Trout — *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*. The foundational claim that the battle is fought in the mind, not the market; the mental “ladder”; the Law of Sacrifice; and the root of position or be positioned.
- Andy Cunningham — his mentor, and the most direct influence. Positioning-is-yin, branding-is-yang; the discipline of position first, brand second; the three modes of differentiation (mechanics, missionaries, mothers); and the hard rule that real positioning has to hurt.
- Hamilton Helmer — *7 Powers*. The structural sources of durable defensibility behind the chapter on moats.
- Carl Jung — the 12 archetypes the brand chapter draws on.
- Simon Sinek — start with why, behind the “deeper why” of brand embodiment.
- Edward Bernays — the engineering of narrative and public perception.
- René Girard — mimetic desire, behind the founder-as-symbol and the perception engine.
- Peter Thiel — competition is for losers, create-don't-compete, and the idea that the market prices the risks you take in public.
- David Sacks — the Jordan Way vs. Thiel Way framing of how companies win.

Threaded through the chapters as epigraphs are the aphorists the method borrows its voice from — Bezos, Gladwell, Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, Mike Tyson. None of these are claimed as Ekram's. They are the giants he stands on, named so you can go read them too.

What's actually his

If the raw concepts are inherited, what is the contribution?

First, the translation. Classical positioning and branding theory was written for a world of physical products, slow media, and defensible distribution. Ekram's work takes it somewhere it was never designed to go: crypto and frontier tech, where the product is open-source and forkable by lunchtime, where capital and talent move on narrative long before the product is finished, and where attention is the scarcest input there is. Most of the classical advice has to be re-derived under those conditions. Doing that re-derivation is the work.

Second, the sharpenings and coinages. Out of that translation comes a vocabulary that is genuinely his: position or be positioned as a daily discipline; the insistence that relevance, not differentiation, is where most positioning dies; "you can't fork brand" and brand as the one uncopyable moat; narrative singularity and the future-delta test; narrative-market-fit arriving before product-market-fit; rizz, bundle-and-breakaway, and meme the gigabrain; main character mode; "early, not evil"; Phased Inevitability, dunk-risk, and the coordination signal; the second existence; and belonging as the moat in an infinite-content world.

His edge, in one line: he took the canon of positioning and made it work where getting perception wrong is immediately fatal.

Why crypto and tech are the proving ground

The method reads as universal — and it largely is — but it was forged in a specific furnace, and that matters. In crypto and frontier tech, the three conditions that make marketing decisive are all turned up to the maximum: products fork, so they can't be the only differentiator; markets are narrative-led, so the story routinely arrives before the substance; and the feed is infinite, so anything the market can't locate or repeat simply doesn't exist. These are the conditions in which positioning stops being decoration and becomes survival — which is exactly why the method is sharpest here, and why the examples in this book lean crypto even as the principles travel everywhere.

A word on this reconstruction

This handbook was built by studying the full corpus closely — the blog Notes, the essays, the X writing, the keynote material — and by holding direct quotation to the primary sources. Where a line is presented as Ekram's, it has been checked against what he actually wrote. Where the book synthesizes, sequences, or extends, it says so.

That is the contract this book runs on: his method, faithfully reconstructed; his words,

accurately quoted; everyone else's ideas, honestly credited. Hold the book to it.

How to Use This Book

“Marketing is the art of positioning.”

– EKRAM

This book is one machine

The fourteen chapters are not fourteen topics. They are one system, assembled in the order its parts depend on each other. Each chapter answers the question the previous one forces, and hands the next exactly what it needs:

What are you? → position. What do you feel like? → brand. Who gathers around you? → culture.

What story carries you through time? → narrative. What fight are you in? → frame and conflict.

Whose face does it wear? → the founder. How do you win the glance? → attention. How do you deliver and defend it? → distribution, launches, crisis. And then: watch it all run at once → the capstone.

Skip a part and the next one has nothing to stand on. Read in order the first time.

The shape of it

The book falls into natural movements:

- Foundation — Ch 1, What Marketing Actually Is. The definition everything else rests on.
- Positioning (the rational core) — Ch 2 Position First, Then Brand · Ch 3 Positioning From First Principles · Ch 4 The Law of Sacrifice · Ch 5 Compete or Create · Ch 6 Moats & Defensibility.
- Brand & culture (the emotional layer) — Ch 7 Brand Is a Response You Earn · Ch 8 Culture, Tribe & Belonging.
- Narrative & competition (carrying it through time) — Ch 9 Narrative as the Frontline · Ch 10 Competing in the Mind.

- The human layer — Ch 11 The Founder as Symbol.
- Execution — Ch 12 Winning Attention · Ch 13 Distribution, Launches & Crisis.
- Capstone — Ch 14 Apply the Method, the whole system run end to end on one company.

Three ways to read it

First read — cover to cover, in order. The dependencies are real; the sequence is the teaching.

After that, three lenses for returning to it:

- Foundational — the irreducible spine. If you read nothing else, read Ch 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, and
 1. That is the minimum viable method: what marketing is, how to position, the four questions, the sacrifice that makes a position real, the brand you earn on top, and the narrative that carries it. Most failures trace back to skipping one of these.
- Advanced — sharpening strategy and defensibility. Ch 5 (compete or create), Ch 6 (moats), Ch 8 (culture), Ch 10 (frame and enemy), Ch 11 (the founder). Read these once the spine is solid; they make a good position formidable.
- Situational — execution, when you're ready to ship and defend. Ch 12 (attention) and Ch 13 (distribution, launches, crisis). Reach for these when you have something built and a moment to deliver.

Then Ch 14 to see the whole machine working together, and the epilogues and appendices as reference (more on those below).

How every chapter is built

Each chapter runs the same structure, so you always know where you are:

- Epigraph — Ekram in one line, to set the frame.
- What this chapter does — the single job of the chapter, and how it connects to the ones around it.
- The core doctrine — the load-bearing claims, numbered. This is the spine; if you remember only one block, remember this one. It closes with a Lineage note separating what's inherited from what's his.
- Teaching sections — the doctrine unpacked.
- Why this matters in crypto and tech — where the principle bites hardest.

- Examples — usually one crypto and one non-crypto, including the occasional failure, because the failures teach fastest. Examples illustrate the method; they are not the method.
- Common mistakes and misreadings — the ways the idea gets misapplied.
- Apply it — do this now — concrete actions to run on your own company.
- Recap and a one-line summary.
- Recall questions — five, to check the chapter actually stuck.

How to actually use it

This is a method to run, not a theory to admire. The chapters are built to be worked:

1. Read the core doctrine first and last — it's the chapter in miniature.
2. Do the “apply it” steps on your own company as you go. The book is most useful with a real subject in front of you.
3. Use the recall questions to find the gaps. If you can't answer them, the chapter hasn't landed yet.
4. When you've finished, study Ch 14 — it runs the entire method on a single company end to end, so you can see the parts working as a whole rather than in isolation.

The back of the book

- Epilogues — three short pieces on the questions the method raises but doesn't resolve inside the chapters: building the brand team, the AI shift, and where the line is between persuasion and manipulation.
- Appendices — the reference layer: a glossary of Ekram's coinages, fill-in worksheets, the emotion and archetype tables, the craft toolkits, the perception-engine catalog, a case library with a verified quote bank, and a reading list pointing back to the lineage in F1.

Coinages are defined on first use and collected in the glossary, so you never have to remember a term to keep reading.

In one line. Read it once in order to learn the system, then return to it with a company in hand and run it.

CHAPTER ONE

What Marketing Actually Is

1

The discipline of being understood, wanted, and believed

“Marketing is the art of positioning.”

EKRAM

WHAT THIS
CHAPTER DOES

Before any tactic, one correction: most people carry a definition of marketing that quietly sabotages everything they do with it, and this chapter replaces it. It's the on-ramp — every later chapter assumes it.

THE CORE DOCTRINE

The load-bearing claims

- 01 **Marketing is perception engineering, not promotion.** It's the discipline that decides what your company means in the market's mind — upstream of ads, not the noise you bolt on afterward.

- 02 **Every company exists twice: once as the product you build, once as the story the market tells about it.** The second one is what people actually act on.

- 03 **The job has three movements — legible, desirable, inevitable.** The market has to understand what you are, want it, and believe it's where the world is going.

- 04 **If you don't position yourself, the market will position you.** A perception forms with or without you. The only question is whether you authored it.

- 05 **Bad marketing isn't ugly — it's invisible.** The failure mode isn't a clumsy ad. It's a good company the market can't locate, doesn't want, or doesn't think matters.

LINEAGE

“marketing is the art of positioning” and “position or be positioned” are Ekram’s own (his essays); the yin/yang of rational positioning vs. emotional brand he credits to Andy Cunningham. The deeper “perception beats product” thesis runs back to Ries & Trout and Levitt’s Marketing Myopia. Legible / desirable / inevitable is this book’s organizing frame. The “second existence” image — reality versus the story the market tells — is how Ekram puts it in his short-form writing, echoing the older idea that everything is created twice.

The enemy: the definition you walked in with

Ask ten people what marketing is and you'll get the same cluster of answers — ads, promotion, content, social, growth, the logo. Underneath all of them sits one assumption: that marketing is what you do to a product after it's built to get people to notice it. Build the real thing, then “do some marketing.”

That assumption is the enemy of this entire book, because it puts marketing downstream and treats it as cosmetic — a megaphone you pick up at the end. And it rests on a comforting lie: the product speaks for itself.

It doesn't. The market meets the story of your product — a tweet, a headline, a friend's offhand description — long before it meets the thing itself, and it acts on the story. That isn't a flaw to fix; it's what marketing is actually about.

What positioning actually is: the second existence

Here's the reframe to keep: every company exists twice. Once as reality — the code, the team, the actual thing you've made. And once as a story — what the market believes you are, where you sit, whether you matter.

These two aren't equally visible. Capital, talent, users, and press can't see your reality directly — too far away, too busy, too many. What they can see is the story, and they allocate — money, attention, careers, coverage — based on it, not on the first existence. Whoever controls that story controls what happens to the company.

Marketing is that control — not the ads, but the deliberate authorship of the second existence.

That's why it's strategic, not decorative: a load-bearing function alongside product and capital, not beneath them. A great product with a broken second existence dies un-found; a real-butearly one with a sharp second existence pulls capital, talent, and users faster than it has any right to.

The three jobs: legible, desirable, inevitable

If marketing's task is to author the second existence, that task has exactly three movements.

Everything in this book serves one of them.

Legible. The market can understand what you are and file you correctly. If a stranger can't say what you do in one sentence, you don't have a perception problem waiting for you later — you have one now, because confusion is an exit. Legibility is the floor. (This is positioning — the rational anchor, Chapters 2–6.)

Desirable. Understanding isn't wanting. A market can grasp exactly what you are and feel nothing — that's a commodity. Desirability is the charge that makes them want you, and it runs on emotion, not specs. (This is brand, and the culture around it — Chapters 7–8.)

Inevitable. The strongest state of all: the market believes you're not a bet but a direction — where things are already going. Inevitability de-risks you in their mind and pulls the future toward you. (This is narrative, and the fight you pick to carry it — Chapters 9–10.)

Legible, desirable, inevitable. Understood, wanted, believed. Miss the first and the other two have nothing to stand on — which is why the order is not negotiable, and why this book begins where it does.

Why position comes before everything

One principle, stated now and earned across the book: you decide what you are before you make anyone feel it. Emotion on a confused position is just noise — a vivid brand atop an illegible company makes the confusion louder. So the method is strictly ordered: position first (the rational anchor), brand second (the emotional resonance), everything else on that base. Start with the logo, the vibe, or the viral moment and you've decorated a question you never answered.

The shape of the book

The rest of this book is one machine, built in the order its parts depend on each other: position, then the brand, culture, narrative, frame, founder, attention, and delivery that compound on top of it — and a closing chapter that runs the whole sequence on a single company. Each part hands the next what it needs, so read them in order. (The full map, and how to read it, is laid out in How to Use This Book.)

Why this matters more in crypto and tech

Everywhere, perception outruns product. In crypto and frontier tech it does so violently, for three reasons. The code is open and forkable — your product can be copied line-for-line by lunchtime, so it cannot be your only differentiator; what doesn't fork is meaning. The markets are narrative-led — capital and talent move on belief about the future long before the product is finished, so the second existence often arrives before the first. And attention is the scarce input — in an infinite feed, a thing no one can locate or repeat may as well not exist. In these markets the winner is rarely the one with the best technology. It's the one with the most legible, most desirable, most inevitable meaning.

EXAMPLES

CRYPTO

Uniswap vs. SushiSwap (the code forks; the position doesn't)

In 2020 a competitor copied Uniswap's code almost verbatim, launched it as SushiSwap, and ran a "vampire attack" to siphon off its liquidity — a near-perfect clone of the reality. It worked, briefly. Then it didn't: Uniswap stayed the default, the name people reached for, the category's reference point. The code forked perfectly; the position — legible, trusted, default-in-the-mind — did not come with it. The durable asset was never only the code. It was the meaning the code had accumulated.

NON-CRYPTO

the Segway (a triumph of reality, a failure of story)

The Segway was an engineering marvel — self-balancing, genuinely novel, hyped before launch as the invention that would redesign cities. The reality was extraordinary; the second existence never formed. The market couldn't answer the obvious questions — what is it, who is it for, why now — so it never became legible, let alone desirable or inevitable. A brilliant product turned into a punchline, not because the engineering failed but because the meaning did. This is what bad marketing actually looks like: not an ugly ad, but strategic invisibility.

One thing got copied and still won; one thing was brilliant and still vanished. Neither outcome was decided by the product alone.

Common mistakes & misreadings

- 1** **"Marketing equals promotion."** Treating it as the megaphone you pick up after building. It's upstream — it sets meaning, not just volume.
- 2** **"The product speaks for itself."** Nothing is experienced before its story. Great tech with no legible meaning dies un-found.
- 3** **"Marketing is decoration."** Logos and copy are outputs; the strategic core is the position you hold in the mind. Pretty is not the same as effective.
- 4** **Confusing loud with legible.** Volume on a confused position amplifies the confusion. More noise is not more perception.
- 5** **Starting with brand or attention before position.** Trying to make people feel or look before you've decided what you are — emotion poured on an unanswered question.

APPLY IT – DO THIS NOW

- 1** **Write your second existence.** One sentence for what you actually are (reality); one for what the market currently says you are (story). The gap between them is your marketing problem, named.
- 2** **Run the three-job test.** Are you legible (a stranger can say what you are in a sentence), desirable (they want it), inevitable (they think it's where things are going)? Whichever is weakest is where this book starts paying off for you.
- 3** **Find where you've been positioned by default.** Name one thing the market already assumes about you that you never chose. That's the cost of leaving your perception unauthored.
- 4** **Name the old definition you walked in with** – ads, content, decoration – and set it down.

The rest of this book runs on the new one.

RECAP

- Marketing is perception engineering, not promotion – the authorship of what you mean, upstream of any ad.
- Every company exists twice; the market acts on the story, so whoever controls the story controls the company's fate.
- The job has three movements: legible, desirable, inevitable – understood, wanted, believed.
- If you don't position yourself, you'll be positioned; and bad marketing isn't ugly, it's invisible.
- The book is one machine, built in dependency order: position → brand → culture → narrative → frame → founder → attention → delivery.

Marketing is the discipline of authoring your company's second existence – making it understood, wanted, and believed – because that story, not the product, is what the market actually acts on.

RECALL – FIVE QUESTIONS

- Q1 What does “every company exists twice” mean, and which existence does the market act on?
-
- Q2 Why is “the product speaks for itself” a strategic error – and why is it more dangerous in crypto?
-
- Q3 Name the three movements of marketing’s job and what each one delivers.
-
- Q4 What does it mean that bad marketing is “invisible, not ugly”? Give an example of strategic invisibility.
-
- Q5 Take a company you admire: state its reality in one sentence and its second existence in one sentence. Where’s the gap?

CHAPTER TWO

Position First, Then Brand

2

The keystone: the rational claim comes before the emotional payoff

“Positioning is rational, branding is emotional. You need both. Start with positioning first. If you don’t position, you will be positioned.”

EKRAM

WHAT THIS
CHAPTER DOES

Why positioning comes before branding — and why a brand is something you earn, not something you ship. This is the keystone; every later chapter assumes it.

THE CORE DOCTRINE

Four claims hold up everything that follows:

- 01 **Positioning is rational; branding is emotional.** Positioning is the logical claim about what you are and why you matter. Branding is the feeling that claim earns.

- 02 **You position first.** You can't engineer a feeling about a thing you haven't defined.

- 03 **Brand is a response you earn, not a stimulus you ship.** You send signals; whatever sticks in other people's heads is the brand.

- 04 **If you don't position, you will be positioned.** Stay vague and the definition gets handed to competitors, reporters, and the crowd.

LINEAGE

“position first” comes from classic positioning theory (Ries & Trout), which Ekram learned from his mentor Andy Cunningham, who launched the Macintosh with Steve Jobs. “A brand is what people say when you’re not in the room” is Bezos. The sharp rational-vs-emotional, position-first framing is how Ekram teaches it — a synthesis, not an invention.

In plain English

Decide what you want to be known for and you've made a choice you control. But your reputation — what people say about you once you leave the room — you can only earn, through what you repeatedly do.

A brand is the same. Positioning is the stake you put in the ground today: what we are, who it's for, why it matters now. Branding is the gut feeling that builds up around that stake as the market experiences you. You write the first. You earn the second.

Most teams work backwards — logo, palette, “vibe” before they've decided what they are.

That's painting a portrait before deciding who's in it.

Positioning vs. branding – the distinction, sharp

	POSITIONING	BRANDING
What it is	The rational claim: what you are, why you matter	The emotional response that claim earns
Speaks to	Logic	Feeling
Who controls it	You (a deliberate choice)	The market (you only influence it)
When	First	Second – and it compounds over years
The test	What a reporter writes after stripping the hype	What people say when you're not in the room
Fails alone as	Dry, technical, forgettable	Vague, hyped, ungrounded

A word on “rational vs. emotional”: Ekram frames it as left-brain/right-brain. Take that as a metaphor, not neuroscience. The point holds anyway – people take things in emotionally and justify them rationally, so a brand has to land on both channels, and both must say the same thing. Rational with no emotion is inert; emotion with no rational spine is hype that collapses the moment it's examined.

“Brand is a response, not a stimulus.” You don't declare a brand. You send signals – a message, a product, a launch – and whatever lands chisels a perception. That perception is the brand.

So “let's build a brand” is the wrong first move: the only levers you hold are your position and your behavior. The brand is the output.

And it has to be an output of something. A feeling has to be a feeling about something. Skip the position and you either broadcast a muddy signal and earn a muddy brand, or you go silent and someone fills the blank for you – a rival frames you as the cheap knockoff, a reporter files you under last year's trend, the crowd forgets. Positioning is, before anything else, an act of self-defense.

Why this matters more in crypto and tech

- Code is copyable; perception isn't. Anyone can fork your features overnight. The position you own in people's minds is the one thing a fork can't take. (More in the moat chapter.)

- Narrative often arrives before the product. In crypto, belief organizes a community before the product is finished — narrative-market-fit can precede product-market-fit. Your position does the work early, when there's little product to point at.
- Categories get assigned in a tweet. Define yours, or the timeline will — and re-rooting a wrong narrative is far harder than planting the right one.
- There's no settled playbook, so a clear position is a disproportionate edge. Most projects are vague.

Two worked examples

Crypto – Celestia

The team first called the tech “pluggable” — accurate to engineers, meaningless to everyone else. That's a feature, not a position; you can't build a movement around “pluggable.”

- Position (rational): “the first modular blockchain network” — flat, factual, categorydefining; the sentence a reporter prints with the hype stripped out.
- Brand (emotional, earned): repeated for years, that claim grew a feeling — a “modular” movement, a tribe, an identity people wanted to wear (“build whatever”).

They didn't pick a color first. They picked a word they could own — “modular” — and earned the feeling on top of it. (Honest note: “modular” was a deliberate, risky reframing of an existing engineering debate, not a settled truth. The lesson isn't that the claim was airtight; it's that they owned a position first, then let the brand follow.)

Non-crypto – Stripe

- Position (rational): payments infrastructure for developers — “accept payments in a few lines of code.” Narrow on purpose; saying no to non-technical buyers is what made it sharp.
- Brand (emotional, earned): years of clean APIs and beautiful docs earned a feeling — Stripe respects builders and gets the details right — a trust no generic “payment solution” commands.

Same chain both times: sharp position → consistent behavior → earned brand. Reverse it and you get vibes with nothing under them. (Beyond tech: Volvo chose “safety” — gave up “fast” and “beautiful” — and decades of acting like the safety company earned the feeling this protects my family.)

Common mistakes & misreadings

- 1** **Starting with the logo.** Colors and vibe are branding, and premature. Can't state your position in one rational sentence? You're not ready to design anything.
- 2** **Mistaking a tagline for a position.** "Build whatever" is a tagline (emotional). "The first modular blockchain network" is the position (rational). A tagline expresses a position; it isn't one. (Chapter 3.)
- 3** **Refusing to choose ("building the future of X").** Vagueness isn't safety; it's an invitation for others to position you.
- 4** **All-rational or all-emotional.** All spec = cold and forgettable (Worldcoin's "verified humans"). All feeling = hype that evaporates. You need both poles, saying the same thing.

APPLY IT – DO THIS NOW

Four steps, in order. Don't skip ahead.

- 1** Write the sentence. Fill in, with zero adjectives: "We are the ___ that ___, for ___, and it matters now because ___." Ban "seamless," "revolutionary," "next-gen."
- 2** Test the sentence. Reporter test: strip every emotional word – is there still a real claim? Empty-room test: would your best customer say this exact sentence to a peer when you're not there? If either fails, sharpen and run it again.
- 3** Catch yourself branding too early. Open your homepage or deck and underline the first thing a stranger sees. If it's a feeling (a slogan, a mood, "the future of finance") instead of a claim (what you are, for whom), you're branding before you've positioned – the most common form of this mistake.
- 4** Fix the order first. Before touching design, color, or tone, lock the sentence from step 1 and make it the first thing every surface says. Then build the emotional layer on top – pointed at the same idea, never a different one.

(You'll turn step 1 into a repeatable tool – the Four Questions – in Chapter 3. Here, the win is the order.)

RECAP

- Positioning = the rational claim (what / why); branding = the emotional response it earns.
 - You control your position; you only earn your brand – so you position first.
 - “Brand is a response, not a stimulus”: you send signals, and whatever sticks is the brand.
 - A feeling has to be a feeling about something – don’t position, and the market positions you.
 - In crypto/tech the stakes rise: code is forkable, narrative leads product, categories get assigned fast.
 - The chain is sharp position → consistent behavior → earned brand.
-

Decide what you are with logic; earn how people feel with consistency – in that order.

RECALL – FIVE QUESTIONS

Q1 Define positioning and branding in one sentence each – and say which one you control.

Q2 Why must positioning come before branding?
Answer in cause and effect.

Q3 What does “a brand is a response, not a stimulus” mean – and what should it make you stop doing?

Q4 What happens to a company that won’t position itself, and why is that especially dangerous in crypto?

Q5 Take a project you know: write its rational position in one sentence, then name the feeling its brand has earned – or failed to.

CHAPTER THREE

Positioning From First Principles

3

What a position actually is, and the four questions that produce one

THE FOUR POSITIONING QUESTIONS

FIG. 01 · CH 3

- 01 **What is it?**
The category you claim — the shelf the mind files you on.

- 02 **Why does it matter?**
Relevance — where most positioning quietly dies.

- 03 **Why you, not a substitute?**
The single differentiator a fork can't carry.

- 04 **Why now?**
The why-now that makes you inevitable, not optional.

Figure 1. *The four positioning questions — the rational skeleton every brand is built on.*

“Marketing is about positioning. Positioning is about differentiation. Differentiation is about authenticity.” — Ekram

WHAT THIS
CHAPTER DOES

Chapter 2 told you to position first; this chapter shows you how — what a position actually is, and how to build and test one.

THE CORE DOCTRINE

The load-bearing claims

- 01 A position is a place you occupy in someone else's mind. You shape it; you never fully control it.

- 02 Four questions produce one: what is it · why does it matter · why you, not a substitute · why now.

- 03 A position is only real if it's Differentiated × Relevant × Authentic. Multiply, don't add — zero any term and the whole thing is zero.

- 04 Be first to the mind, not first to market — and keep re-earning relevance, because it decays.

LINEAGE

the four-question discipline and “own a differentiated place in the mind” come from the Ries & Trout / Cunningham positioning tradition. Ekram's contribution is the forcingfunction framing — especially “differentiation is about authenticity,” and the insistence that relevance, not difference, is where most positioning dies.

The Four Questions

This is the whole engine. Answer these four in plain language and you have a draft position.

(Ekram learned them from Andy Cunningham; they're the spine of his keynote.)

1. What is it? The noun. Strip every marketing word — what would a reporter write? If your answer is a feature (“pluggable,” “ZK-powered”) or a mood (“the future of finance”), you haven't answered it. Name the thing.
2. Why does it matter? The value, not the feature. People don't buy a plane ticket; they buy a destination. Ask “so what?” of your answer, then ask it again, until you hit something a human actually wants. The feature is “fast finality”; the so-what is “your app never feels broken.”

3. Why you, and not a substitute? Note the word: substitute, not competitor. The real alternative is rarely the rival you fear — it's the status quo, a workaround, or doing nothing. Positioning solves the tyranny of choice: in a sea of options, why this one? If you can't beat "they just keep doing what they already do," you don't have a reason to exist yet.
4. Why now? What changed. What trend or force makes this the moment — and why was last year too early, why is waiting a mistake? "Why now" turns a product into a movement and a fact into urgency.

Box — fill this in: We are the [what] that [why it matters], for people who [who], unlike [the substitute], and now is the moment because [why now]. If a blank makes you reach for an adjective, you haven't answered it yet.

The quality test: Differentiation × Relevance × Authenticity

The Four Questions give you a draft. This equation tells you if it's any good. Judge each, then multiply:

- Differentiation — are you actually different? We're wired to notice difference; sameness is invisible.
- Relevance — does the market care about that difference? This is where most positioning dies. Founders fall in love with a differentiator their customers never think about. (Ekram once ran user interviews for a brand obsessed with one feature; asked about it, the market said flatly they didn't think about it at all.) You can be famous but irrelevant — he ran PR for a company that invented the firewall and was still sliding into irrelevance.
- Authenticity — is the difference true? Rooted in something real about the company, or a claim a rival can expose? A difference you can't back gets found out.

Why multiply, not add: different-but-irrelevant is a novelty; relevant-but-same is a commodity; either one times zero is zero. Partial credit doesn't exist.

Box (optional) — the mind is a ranked, leaky ladder. People file brands on mental "ladders" — rungs, ranked, one per category — and the mind forgets fast. That's why difference and relevance matter so much: you're fighting for a single rung in a crowded, leaking mind. The mechanics of climbing that ladder come in a later chapter.

First to the mind, not first to market (advanced)

"First" is a fragile position. It has a shelf-life: eventually the market stops wanting the first and starts wanting the best. And fame isn't relevance — you can be widely known and still drifting out of the conversation. Relevance is earned by positioning, then re-positioning when the conversation moves on. Treat positioning as hygiene, not a launch-day task: the

signal that it's time to reposition is the first whiff of irrelevance.

Positioning statement ≠ tagline

Two artifacts, constantly confused:

- A positioning statement is the factual, reporter-safe answer to the Four Questions. (“The first modular blockchain network.”)
- A tagline is the emotional one-liner — a manifestation of the position, not the position itself. (“Build whatever.”)

Taglines (Ekram calls the punchy ones zingers) are good and necessary. But shipping a zinger while skipping the statement is the trap. “No Software” (Salesforce), “One Click” (Amazon), “only possible on Solana” — all taglines. None is the positioning statement underneath. Write the statement first; let the tagline express it.

Why this matters more in crypto and tech

- When the product is early or abstract, the Four Questions are all you have — there's no demo to point at, only a position.
- “Why now” is load-bearing in crypto, where attention is cyclical and timing is everything.
- Relevance decays fast as narratives rotate — so repositioning is maintenance, not failure.
- Substitution is brutal: forks, alternatives, and “just keep doing what we do” are always on the table, so Question 3 is where crypto positions live or die.

Two worked examples

Crypto — Celestia (running the Four Questions)

- What: the first modular blockchain network.
- Why it matters: you can launch your own chain without building the whole stack — cheaper, faster, customizable.
- Why you, not a substitute: the substitute is “just build on a monolithic L1.” The why-you: monolithic chains force you to take the whole bundle; modular lets you pick your pieces.
- Why now: L1s were hitting their limits and fragmenting — the moment the monolithic model began to strain.

- Test: differentiated (a new “modular” category) × relevant (builders feel the monolithic pain) × authentic (grounded in real data-availability tech). All three non-zero — a real position.

Non-crypto – Superhuman

- What: a blazing-fast email client.
- Why it matters: you get hours back and actually hit inbox zero instead of drowning.
- Why you, not a substitute: the substitute is free Gmail or Outlook. The why-you: speed for people who live in email — worth paying for precisely because the free option is slow.
- Why now: email volume exploded; knowledge workers are buried.
- Test: differentiated (speed) × relevant (heavy email users care intensely) × authentic (it genuinely is the fastest). Note the sacrifice baked in — it’s not for casual emailers, which is what makes it sharp (Chapter 4).

Common mistakes & misreadings

- 1** Answering “what is it” with a feature or insider term. “Pluggable” is what it does; it isn’t what it is.
- 2** Skipping the “so what.” Stating a feature as if it were value — and never checking whether anyone cares. The most common failure is a differentiator the market is indifferent to.
- 3** Only counting named competitors. The substitute that beats you is usually “the status quo” or “do nothing,” not the rival on your slide.
- 4** No “why now.” A position with no timing has no urgency — and urgency is half its power.
- 5** Adding instead of multiplying. “We’re really different!” with low relevance is a zero, not a near-miss.

APPLY IT – DO THIS NOW

- 1** **Answer the four, one tight sentence each.** Use the box template. No adjectives doing the work.
- 2** **Run the gate – no numbers.** Ask three hard questions: Different? Relevant? Authentic? Answer each yes / weak / no, and treat “weak” as “no.” If any answer isn’t a clean yes, the position isn’t ready – a “no” on relevance is a novelty, a “no” on authenticity is a claim you’ll get caught on. Fix Question 2 or 3 before you write another word.
- 3** **Pressure-test relevance with real people.** Ask three actual users/buyers: “Does this difference matter to you?” If they shrug, your differentiator is wrong, however much you love it.
- 4** **Split statement from tagline.** Write the factual positioning statement and a candidate tagline, label which is which, and make sure the statement – not the tagline – is what your homepage leads with.

RECAP

- A position is a place in a mind; the Four Questions produce a draft of it: what · why it matters · why you (not a substitute) · why now.
- Judge it by Differentiation × Relevance × Authenticity – multiply, don’t add. Relevance is where most positions die.
- Be first to the mind, and re-earn relevance as it decays.
- A positioning statement is factual; a tagline is its emotional expression – don’t confuse them.

RECALL – FIVE QUESTIONS

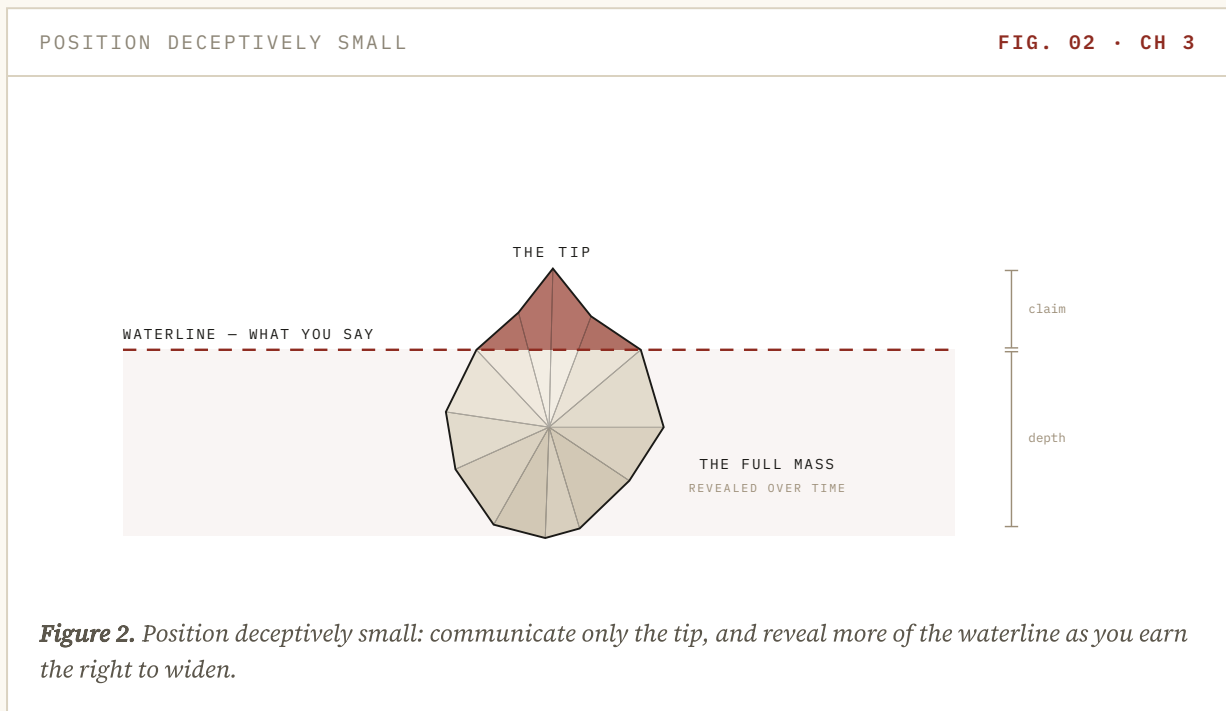
- Q1 List the Four Questions from memory. Which one does most positioning fail on?
-
- Q2 Why is “substitute” a more useful word than “competitor” in Question 3?
-
- Q3 What does it mean, in practice, that Differentiation × Relevance × Authenticity is multiplicative?
-
- Q4 Give an example of “famous but irrelevant,” and explain why it’s a positioning failure.
-
- Q5 Take a product you know: answer all four questions in one sentence each, then score Differentiation × Relevance.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Law of Sacrifice

4

A position is made by subtraction: what you refuse to be



“A great positioning strategy must hurt... Identity is forged through what you refuse to be.”
— Ekram

WHAT THIS
CHAPTER DOES

In Chapter 3 you produced a draft position. This chapter sharpens it the only way a position ever gets sharp — by cutting.

THE CORE DOCTRINE

The load-bearing claims

- 01 **A position is made by subtraction, not addition.** You sharpen it by removing, never by piling on.
- 02 **It has to hurt.** If your positioning costs you nothing, it isn't strong enough — a costless position is one any competitor can also hold.
- 03 **Identity is forged through what you refuse to be.** You become legible by what you say no to.
- 04 **The narrower the position, the stronger the brand.** You're either a wandering generality or a meaningful specific.

LINEAGE

the “Law of Sacrifice” is Ries & Trout’s; Ekram learned its hard edge — positioning must hurt — from Andy Cunningham. His sharpening is that the cost is the proof: if it’s painless, it isn’t a position.

In plain English

A position is a claim on space in someone’s mind. That space is scarce and already occupied.

To win a slot, you can’t be a longer list of attributes — you have to be a sharper one. Sharpening means cutting.

Most teams do the opposite. Another audience, another use-case, another bullet on the homepage — each addition feels like more reach. It’s the reverse: every addition blurs the edge. A knife gets sharp by removing metal, not adding it.

The everything trap

Broadness feels safe. “We’re for everyone” seems to maximize the market and avoid alienating anyone. It does the opposite. If you’re everything to everybody, you’re nothing to nobody. A claim that fits everyone describes no one — the mind has nothing to grab onto — so breadth doesn’t capture more market, it makes you forgettable to all of it.

This is counterintuitive enough that smart teams fall in anyway, because saying no feels like leaving money on the table. It isn’t. (On early Solana, Austin Federa was explicit: the

goal was not to appeal to everyone — only to the people who could actually make it succeed.)

Every no is a deeper yes

Here's the trade, made explicit:

- What you exclude — segments you won't serve, features you won't build, money you'll turn away.
- Who you alienate — and that's good: a position no one rejects is too soft to attract anyone strongly.
- What you refuse to be — the one thing you'll never claim.

Each no concentrates the yes. Every “no” is a deeper “yes” towards the audience that matters the most. You're not losing the excluded market; you're trading a diffuse, weak presence across everyone for sharp, strong ownership among the few who count — and those few pull the rest in later.

Put it in the terms of Chapter 3: relevance is finite attention. You can spend it deep on one audience or smear it thin across ten. Sacrifice is choosing depth.

It must hurt — the cost is the proof

A real sacrifice costs something now: revenue you decline, a segment you wave off, a feature you kill. If your “positioning” gives up nothing, it isn't sharp — it's a description, and any rival can also claim it. The pain is the moat: a costless position is, by definition, copyable.

So the diagnostic is blunt. List what you're giving up. If the list doesn't sting, you haven't cut deep enough — keep cutting until it does.

Sacrifice is a wedge, not a ceiling

The catch that trips people up: narrowing is temporary focus, not permanent smallness. You position deceptively small to win a space you can dominate now, then widen from strength.

- Amazon launched as “the online bookstore,” not “the everything store” — even though Bezos always meant the latter.
- Facebook gated itself to Harvard, then a handful of campuses, long before the world.

Each shrank its claim to something ownable, won it, and expanded from there. The narrow position is the wedge that gets you in — not a cap on how big you get. (Which larger game you widen into is a Chapter 5 question; here the only point is that small is a starting move,

not a limit.)

Two examples

Crypto – Solana

Solana could have taken the broad, safe ground: “decentralized, secure, scalable, for everyone.”

It refused. It sacrificed:

- decentralization-maximalism and the Ethereum-aligned purist crowd, and
- the “onboard everyone” mass-appeal message, to own one word: speed. Early on the message wasn’t fluffy – it was “you literally can’t build this anywhere else,” aimed at the GitHub crowd, not the Twitter crowd.
- Given up: the purists, the safety of “balanced,” a slice of the mass-market narrative.
- Gained: an ownable position (speed/performance), a fierce builder tribe, and an emotional charge – thrill – that no “balanced” chain could touch.

Non-crypto – In-N-Out

In-N-Out’s menu is a handful of items – burgers, fries, shakes, not much else. No chicken, no fish, no limited-time gimmicks, and for most of its history, almost no expansion beyond a few Western states.

- Given up: menu breadth, franchising, and the fast national growth a bigger menu and rollout would have bought.
- Gained: a reputation for freshness and quality, and a cult that lines up for hours – precisely because the menu is small and the chain is scarce.

Both narrowed hard. Both came out stronger, not smaller, for it.

Common mistakes & misreadings

- 1** **Sacrifice ≠ permanent smallness.** It's a wedge. Amazon didn't stay the bookstore. Narrow to win, then widen.
- 2** **Sacrifice ≠ random edginess.** Cutting real territory is strategic; "being weird for attention" is not. You give up actual audiences and revenue — that's a different act from provocation (which comes later).
- 3** **Sacrifice ≠ self-sabotage.** You give up what you can't dominate in order to dominate what you can. It's focus, not harm.
- 4** **Broadness ≠ scale.** A wide claim doesn't make you big — it makes you forgettable. You reach scale by owning narrow and widening, not by claiming wide on day one.
- 5** **The painless "sacrifice."** If your list of no's costs nothing, you haven't made one. Sharpen until it stings.

APPLY IT — DO THIS NOW

Write four lists, specific enough to hurt:

- 1** **What you're trying to own** — the one word or space, from your Chapter 3 position.
- 2** **What you must stop claiming** — every other thing your homepage or deck currently says you are. Cut it to one.
- 3** **Who you're not for** — name the audience you're deliberately not serving, out loud. If you can't name anyone, you haven't positioned.
- 4** **The no you're avoiding** — the tradeoff you keep dodging because it costs real money or a real segment. That's almost always the exact cut that would sharpen you most.

If none of the four made you wince, go back and cut deeper. The wince is the signal.

RECAP

- A position is made by subtraction, and it has to cost something — or it isn't sharp.
 - “Everything to everybody = nothing to nobody.” Breadth is forgettable, not safe.
 - Every no concentrates the yes: weak presence everywhere traded for strong ownership where it counts.
 - Narrow is a wedge, not a ceiling — win small, then widen.
 - If it doesn't hurt, you haven't sacrificed.
-

*You don't sharpen a position by adding to it —
you sharpen it by what you're willing to lose.*

RECALL – FIVE QUESTIONS

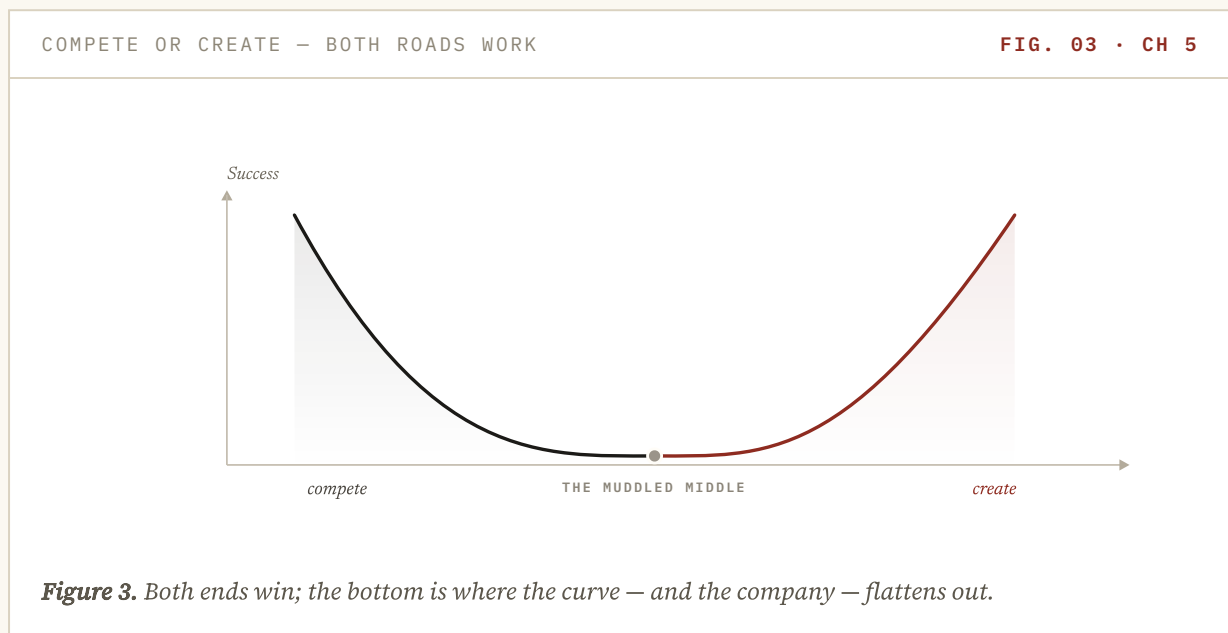
- Q1 Why must a position “hurt” to be strong – and what does the pain actually prove?
-
- Q2 Explain “every no is a deeper yes” in terms of attention and relevance.
-
- Q3 Why is “deceptively small” a wedge and not a ceiling? Give an example.
-
- Q4 Distinguish sacrifice from (a) random edginess and (b) self-sabotage.
-
- Q5 For a project you know: name what it’s trying to own, what it should stop claiming, and the one audience it should declare it is not for.

CHAPTER FIVE

Compete or Create

5

Once your position is sharp, choose your game – and stop straddling



“Two formulas for mega success: the Michael Jordan Way – compete and win – and the Peter Thiel Way – avoid competition, create your own game. Being in the middle? Not so good.”

– DAVID SACKS, QUOTED BY EKRAM

WHAT THIS
CHAPTER DOES

You’ve sharpened a position (Ch 3) and cut it to something ownable (Ch 4). Now one decision: which game are you playing – competing inside an existing category, or creating a new one?

THE CORE DOCTRINE

The load-bearing claims

- 01 After you sharpen a position, you must pick a game: compete inside an existing category, or create a new one.
- 02 **The middle is mush.** Straddling — “we’re better and new” — leaves the market unable to say what you are. Pick a side.
- 03 **Each path has a price.** Compete: be provably superior on a visible axis, and defend it. Create: educate the market and hold the narrative for years.
- 04 **Your difference comes from one of three places** — product, concept, or user — and feature-only difference is the most fragile, because features get copied.

LINEAGE

the Jordan/Thiel framing is David Sacks’ (Ekram cites it directly); the three differentiation modes are Andy Cunningham’s “mechanics, missionaries, mothers.” Thiel’s “competition is for losers” is his own.

Jordan vs. Thiel, in plain English

Two ways to win:

- The Jordan Way — be the best inside an existing arena. Accept the comparison and beat it. Michael Jordan didn’t invent basketball; he dominated it. You compete, you win, you double down when the fight gets fierce.
- The Thiel Way — escape the comparison by creating a category only you own. Avoid the fight; build a compounding advantage; if a battle gets too bloody, change the game.

The fork is that simple: accept a comparison and win it, or refuse the comparison and define a new one. What you can’t do is both — that’s the straddle, and most brands die in it, “never picking a side.” Both real paths work. The mush between them doesn’t.

What each path costs

Neither is free. They just bill you differently.

The Jordan tax — proof and defense.

- You need actual, provable superiority on a visible axis — speed, price, liquidity, UX. Not a claim; a fact.
- You assert a point of view about what matters in the category (“speed is what matters; speed kills”) and push the market to rank everyone by your axis.
- The bill: the moment you win on an axis, rivals copy it. You’re in a sharp-elbow, bruteforce fight, defending a measurable lead indefinitely. Jordan demands resources and aggression. The Thiel tax — education and patience.
- Introduce something new and the market doesn’t understand it yet, so you carry the burden of education — you teach the category before anyone can value you.
- The bill: a year or more of disciplined, on-message repetition, plus the “category of one” problem — the market distrusts a category with only you in it. The fix is to invite others in so it comes alive (Chapter 10). Most teams quit before the words land. That’s the graveyard.

A common winning combination: Thiel for the narrative, Jordan for the proof — create the category in your story, but back it with hard numbers so it isn’t vapor.

Three ways to differentiate

Whichever game you pick, your difference comes from one of three places:

- Product-centric — different on what it does: features, performance, architecture. Strong when the superiority is real and you back it with numbers. Weakest as a moat, because a feature is the most copyable thing there is — so anchor on the durable value, not the spec. (Usually a Jordan move.)
- Concept-centric — different on an idea, belief, or category: “modular,” “sovereign rollups,” a mission, a founder’s worldview. Harder to copy, because it lives in meaning, not code. (Usually a Thiel move.)
- User-centric — different by who you serve best: over-serve one tribe, or win on experience. (Supports either game.)

The throughline: feature-only differentiation is fragile. Concept and user difference last longer because they aren’t a line of code a rival clones next quarter. (Why that’s the real moat is Chapter 6.)

Two examples

Crypto – same arena, two games

- Solana chose Jordan. It competed inside the existing layer-1 category, declared speed the axis that mattered, and won by being provably fastest. Why it worked: a real, measurable edge plus a relentless point of view. Tradeoff: everyone now claims speed, so Solana defends that lead in a brutal, copy-heavy fight.
- Celestia chose Thiel. It refused the L1 race and created a new category – modular – that made the old comparison irrelevant. Why it worked: it escaped a head-to-head it might not win and owned a word instead. Tradeoff: a year of teaching “modular,” and constant work inviting others in so it wasn’t a category of one.

Same market, two legitimate games. Neither straddled.

Non-crypto – one built the game, one won inside it

- Red Bull chose Thiel. It didn’t make a better soda – it built the energy drink category in the West and escaped the soft-drink comparison entirely. Tax: it had to teach the world what an energy drink even was, and define the category for years.
- Monster chose Jordan. Once the category existed, Monster competed inside it – bigger cans, more flavors, more sponsorships – and became a strong #2. Tax: it lives or dies out-competing on visible axes, forever.

Both succeeded. The straddle – a third drink that was “kind of new, kind of better” – is the one you’ve never heard of.

Common mistakes & misreadings

- 1 Fake category creation.** A new name over a me-too (“we’re not a CRM, we’re a revenue intelligence platform”) when you’re just a weaker CRM. A fresh word on an old, worse product fools no one.
- 2 Fake superiority.** Playing Jordan (“we’re the fastest/best”) with no actual, defensible edge. Someone who is better will crush you on your own axis.
- 3 Doing both at once.** “We’re better and a whole new category.” The market can’t hold two stories, so it holds none. Mush.
- 4 Confusing a feature with a category.** A toggle is not a frame. A category changes how people see the whole market; a feature just adds a checkbox.
- 5 Inventing a category nobody needs.** A new word with no real pain behind it (“aggregated,”

“elastic”) – a category of one and of zero demand.

APPLY IT – DO THIS NOW

Answer four questions plainly. Vagueness here is the tell that you're straddling.

- 1** **Are we competing or creating?** Say the word: Jordan or Thiel. If you can't choose, you're in the mush.
- 2** **What are we trying to own?** Jordan: the axis you win on. Thiel: the category you define.
- 3** **What comparison are we accepting or escaping?** Jordan: name the rival you'll outperform. Thiel: name the old category you'll make obsolete.
- 4** **What burden does our path create** – and are we resourced for it? Jordan: the superiority you must prove and keep defending. Thiel: the education and inclusion you must sustain for years. Can't pay the bill? You picked the wrong game.

RECAP

- After sharpening, choose a game: compete (Jordan) or create (Thiel). The middle is mush.
- Jordan's tax is proof and defense; Thiel's tax is education and patience. Often: Thiel for narrative, Jordan for proof.
- Difference comes from product, concept, or user – and feature-only difference is the most fragile.
- Same market, two valid games (Solana / Celestia; Red Bull / Monster). The straddle is the loser.

RECALL – FIVE QUESTIONS

- Q1 State the Jordan Way and the Thiel Way in one sentence each. What's wrong with the middle?
-
- Q2 What is the “tax” on each path, and how do the two differ?
-
- Q3 What's the difference between a feature and a category – and why does it matter here?
-
- Q4 Name the three differentiation modes. Why is feature-only differentiation the most fragile?
-
- Q5 For a project you know: is it competing or creating? What comparison is it accepting or escaping, and can it pay that path's bill?

CHAPTER SIX

Moats & Defensibility

Differentiation gets you noticed; defensibility keeps you alive

6

“You can’t fork brand.”

EKRAM

WHAT THIS
CHAPTER DOES

Chapters 3–5 made you different. This one asks the harder question: can anyone just copy that?

THE CORE DOCTRINE

The load-bearing claims

- 01 **Differentiation gets attention; defensibility keeps it.** Different is the price of entry; hard-to-copy is the prize.
- 02 **Features are fragile.** Anything you can write down — a feature, a spec, the code itself — gets copied. Assume within ~12 months.
- 03 **Brand is the moat you can’t fork.** The durable moats are relational and perceptual: they live in other people’s minds, where a rival can’t reach.
- 04 **The test for any advantage: “Can this be forked?”** If yes, it isn’t your moat.

LINEAGE

the “seven modes” below are Hamilton Helmer’s (7 Powers). “You can’t fork brand” is Ekram’s crypto restatement of Helmer’s Branding power — and the moat he weights most.

Brand is the moat you can’t fork

Concrete, not mystical. In open-source and crypto, “fork” is literal: anyone can copy your entire codebase and ship an identical product overnight, for free. So your code and

features cannot be your moat — a fork takes them and owes you nothing.

What a fork can't take: the trust, meaning, identity, and belonging that have accumulated in the market's mind over time. You can copy the shoe; you can't copy "Nike." You can fork the protocol; you can't fork the community's belief in it.

Why this matters most in fast-copy markets: when the product is copyable by design, brand is often the only durable advantage left. So Ekram's rule is blunt — assume every feature is copied within a year, and spend your durable budget on meaning, not on feature parity.

Novelty decays (someone ships newer); perception compounds (trust and identity build for years and don't transfer to the copycat).

The seven modes of defensibility

A working checklist (Helmer's 7 Powers) — one line each, what it is and what it looks like:

MODE	WHAT IT IS	IN PRACTICE
Scale economies	Costs drop as you grow	Amazon, Walmart
Network effects	Each user makes it more valuable to others	Facebook; an L1 with more apps + users
Counter-positioning	A model the incumbent can't copy without killing their own business	Netflix vs. Blockbuster (Ch 10)
Switching costs	Leaving is painful or expensive	The Apple ecosystem; deep integrations
Brand	People choose you for meaning, not specs	Nike, a16z — decisive in commoditized markets
Cornered resource	Unique or asymmetric access (talent, data, a deal)	De Beers; an irreplaceable team
Process power	You operate in a way rivals can't replicate	Toyota's production system

Don't memorize the taxonomy — use it. For any advantage you claim, find which of the seven it actually is. If it isn't on the list, it's probably a feature — and a feature is a head start, not a moat.

Where this method puts its weight

Most of these moats take time (network effects) or capital (scale) you may not have. The method leans hardest on the ones you can start building on day one, with meaning:

- Brand — the headline. In a commoditized space, the brand is the difference (“I prefer brand as the largest moat”). It’s also the only one a fork can’t take.
- Frame control (advanced) — the highest form of positioning power is owning the definition everyone else is forced to argue inside of. Set the category’s terms and every competitor reinforces you just by speaking your language. (A positioning moat; we’ll see it weaponized in Ch 10.)
- The new relational moats — belonging, soul, the learning loop — when features and content are infinite, scarcity moves to things a rival can’t clone: a community with real membership, an identity people attach to, and a usage→data→improvement flywheel. All relational, which is exactly why they’re defensible. (Belonging gets its own chapter — Ch 8.)

The pattern: the strongest moats here are perceptual and relational, not technical. Code forks; meaning doesn’t.

EXAMPLES

CRYPTO

Ethereum (the fork test, literally)

Ethereum's moat was never its code — the code was literally forked (Ethereum Classic split off in 2016 with the same technology). The fork went nowhere. Why? The developers, the apps, the network, and the belief stayed with Ethereum. The copy had identical tech and none of the brand, community, or soul. That's "you can't fork brand" in the most literal possible form: same code, no moat — because the moat was never the code.

NON-CRYPTO

Nike

Sneakers are commoditized and endlessly copyable; factories will clone any shoe. Nike's moat is brand — the accumulated meaning, identity, and aspiration attached to the swoosh. You can copy the product down to the stitch; you cannot copy what "Nike" means to the person wearing it. That perception has held for decades against cheaper, technically comparable rivals.

THE COUNTER-CASE

Clubhouse (a feature is not a moat)

Clubhouse's live-audio rooms were genuinely novel and exploded in 2020–21. The feature was also trivially copyable: within months Twitter Spaces, Spotify, and others shipped the same thing. Clubhouse had a feature lead and nothing underneath it — no durable brand meaning, weak network lock-in — so when the feature was cloned, the attention left with it. Novel feature, no moat, fast collapse.

Common mistakes & misreadings

- 1** **Mistaking a feature for a moat.** "We have X" is a head start, not defensibility. If you can write it down, it can be copied.
- 2** **Assuming technical superiority is enough.** Better tech loses to better brand constantly — people don't choose on specs.
- 3** **Confusing attention with staying power.** A viral moment is rented attention, not a moat (see Clubhouse).
- 4** **Treating "brand" as aesthetics.** The moat isn't the logo or the palette — it's the durable perception underneath. Pretty is not defensible; meaning is.

APPLY IT — DO THIS NOW

The fork test. *Imagine a competitor forks your product 1:1 tonight — identical features, identical code.*

- 1** **List what they now have.** (Usually: everything on your features page.)
- 2** **List what they still don't have.** Your reputation? Your community? The category you defined? The trust you've earned?
- 3** **Read the second list** — that is your moat. If it's empty, you're differentiated but not defensible, and you're one competent copycat away from irrelevance.
- 4** **Now follow the money.** Are you spending your durable budget on widening that second list — meaning, frame, belonging — or on chasing feature parity anyone can match? Move the spend.

RECAP

- Differentiation gets attention; defensibility keeps it.
- Anything codifiable gets copied, so features are a head start, not a moat.
- Brand is the moat you can't fork: the relational, perceptual asset a competitor can't reach.
- Use the seven modes to name what your advantage actually is; the method weights brand, frame control, and belonging most.
- The fork test: what survives a 1:1 clone is your real moat.

*If a competitor can copy it, it isn't your moat
— your moat is what's left after they do.*

RECALL – FIVE QUESTIONS

- Q1 What does “you can’t fork brand” mean, and why does it bite hardest in crypto / opensource?
-
- Q2 Name the seven modes of defensibility. Which does this method weight most, and why?
-
- Q3 Why is a feature “a head start, not a moat”? Give an example of a feature lead that collapsed.
-
- Q4 Run the fork test on a product you know: what survives a 1:1 clone?
-
- Q5 Why is treating “brand” as aesthetics a mistake — what is the brand moat actually made of?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Brand Is a Response You Earn

7

Build one recognizable emotional character – and make sure the position earns it

THE BRAND STACK – BUILD ORDER

FIG. 04 · CH 7

Deeper why	01
Brand-as-person – three traits	02
Core attribute – one word	03
Emotional center – one feeling	04
Visual signature – the logo	05 · LAST

Figure 4. Work down the stack before you touch a logo. The visual signature is the last step, not the first.

“Brand is a prize that you have to earn.” – Ekram

**WHAT THIS
CHAPTER DOES**

You’ve locked a rational position (Chapters 2–6). Now you build the emotional layer – the brand – on top of it.

THE CORE DOCTRINE

The load-bearing claims

- 01 **Brand is the response the market develops to your position** — the emotional character that forms in people’s memory. You earn it; you don’t apply it.

- 02 **Branding is emotional and comes second.** It sits on top of the rational position — never before it, never instead of it.

- 03 **It is not design.** A logo, palette, and font are expressions of a brand, not the brand itself.

- 04 **One character, performed not stated.** Own one dominant emotion and one archetype; project everything and you project nothing.

- 05 **The feeling must reinforce the position.** An emotional layer disconnected from what you actually are is decoration. One that dramatizes your position is a brand.

LINEAGE

the seven emotional triggers are Sally Hogshead’s; the 12 archetypes are Carl Jung’s; “people buy the why” is Simon Sinek’s; “your brand is what people say when you’re not in the room” is Bezos. Ekram’s edge is one owned emotion, performed, and coherent with the position.

What branding actually is — and isn’t

A brand is not your logo, your colors, your fonts, or your tagline. Those are the visible surface — which is exactly why people mistake them for the thing. The brand is underneath: the emotional pattern the market recognizes and feels when it meets you.

The real test is pattern recognition — you know it before it’s explained. You feel “Apple” or “Nike” or “Solana” in the half-second before you read a word, because a coherent pattern has been burned into memory through repetition. That’s what you’re building: not a look, but a recognizable feeling stored in other people’s heads.

So “looks branded” and “has a brand” are different things. Looks branded means a tidy visual identity. Has a brand means that when the logo is cropped out, people still feel exactly who you are — because the pattern, not the logo, is doing the work.

Give it one recognizable character

A brand needs one dominant emotional shape — legible across a crowded room, recognizable before it's fully explained. You get there by subtracting, the same as positioning: pick the one feeling and refuse the rest.

Why one? Project confidence and playfulness and gravitas and warmth and the market reads nothing — the signals cancel. A single emotion, performed consistently, becomes a felt signature. Mush is the default failure of branding exactly as it is of positioning.

Own one emotion. Solana owns thrill. Bitcoin owns autonomy. Polychain owns mystique. The method's menu of seven — power, lust, mystique, alarm, prestige, rebellion, trust — is a tool, not a checklist (full menu in the appendix). Pick one, maybe two; go full-throttle; ignore the rest. Ask: is your brand flight or fight? If you can't answer, you haven't chosen.

Embody one archetype. Twelve archetypes already live in everyone's head — Hero, Sage, Outlaw, Magician, Ruler, Everyman. Pick one dominant (a secondary is fine). Nike is a Hero; Cosmos is an Outlaw. The catch: an archetype is a strategic role, not a look — “Sage” means truth and proof, not “a clean serif.” (Full catalog with crypto examples: appendix.)

Perform the feeling — don't state it

The move that separates a brand from a press release: the strongest brands perform their emotion instead of announcing it.

Red Bull never says “we are extreme.” It hosts the X Games, jumps a man from the stratosphere, sponsors cliff-diving. The feeling lands through what it does. Saying an emotion is weak and distrusted — anyone can type “bold, innovative, extreme.” Performing it is undeniable, because it costs something to enact. For any feeling you want, the question is never “what do we say?” but “what do we do that makes people feel it?”

Build it: brand embodiment

Five elements. Lock these — one line each — before any asset:

1. Deeper why — the belief under the product. People buy the why.
2. Brand-as-person — three personality traits, if it were human.
3. Core attribute — the one word you want synonymized with you.
4. Emotional center — the single feeling you perform.
5. Visual signature — recognizable without the logo or name: a gradient, a motif, a shape.

Solana's gradient survives the name being removed.

Your site, deck, and videos are just expressions of these five. Get them right and the assets nearly write themselves.

Box — craft toolkit (brief). Fast tests for any asset: the napkin test (can a stranger redraw your mark from memory?), the tattoo/swag test (would a fan wear it?), and a score on authenticity × differentiation × extendability. One rule: design isn't a democracy — vest taste in one owner. (Full toolkit: appendix.)

The coherence check — does the position earn the feeling?

Here's the part most branding skips. The emotional layer can't float free of the position; it has to dramatize it. The feeling is the emotional translation of the rational claim.

- Solana's position is "the fastest chain." Its feeling is thrill — because thrill is what speed feels like.
- Red Bull's position is "the energy drink for performance." Its feeling is extreme — because extreme is energy pushed to its limit.

When the feeling and the position point at the same thing, they compound. When they don't — a sober infrastructure protocol wearing a jokester brand, a luxury product that feels cheap — the market senses the seam and trusts neither layer. A brand that feels like something other than what you are isn't a brand; it's a costume.

Why this matters more in crypto and tech

- Crypto is tribal and emotional; a technically accurate but cold brand bonds no one.
- Products are commoditized, so the feeling is the differentiator — the brand moat from Chapter 6, made tangible.
- In the feed you're one of a thousand posts, so a visual signature recognizable without the logo is what stops the scroll.

EXAMPLES

CRYPTO

Solana

- Position underneath: the fastest blockchain.
- Emotional layer on top: thrill / power.
- Why the combination works: thrill is the felt version of speed — so the gradient, the raveenergy hacker houses, the velocity of the whole brand dramatize the position instead of decorating it. Crop the name and you still feel it.

NON-CRYPTO

Red Bull

- Position: the energy drink for performance (“gives you wings”).
- Emotional layer: “extreme,” performed and never stated, through stunts and events.
- Why it works: “extreme” and “energy” are the same idea — one rational, one visceral.

Remove the words and you still know exactly what it is. The clearest, most memorable emotional character in marketing.

THE COUNTER-CASE

Worldcoin’s “verified humans”

Technically precise, emotionally dead. It states a fact and performs no feeling, so it bonds no one — and even the fact reads cold rather than reassuring. All rational layer, no character, no emotional translation of the position. Accurate, and forgettable.

Common mistakes & misreadings

- 1** **Confusing branding with logo / colors / fonts.** That’s the surface. If cropping the logo makes you unrecognizable, you have a logo, not a brand.
- 2** **An emotional layer disconnected from the position.** A feeling that doesn’t dramatize what you actually are floats free — and the market senses the seam.
- 3** **Copying aesthetics without the character.** Cloning a winner’s gradient or vibe without the position and strategy that earned it gets you a costume, not a brand.
- 4** **Generic, polished, forgettable.** A brand that states instead of performs, plays it safe, and offends no one — and so is felt by no one.

APPLY IT – DO THIS NOW

- 1** **Name the feeling.** In one word: what do you want people to feel? (Your emotional center.)
- 2** **Lock the five embodiment elements** – deeper why, brand-as-person, core attribute, emotional center, visual signature. One line each.
- 3** **Choose one archetype and one (maybe two) triggers** – by strategic role, not by font – and name what you’re not projecting.
- 4** **Run the coherence check.** Draw the line from position to feeling in one sentence: “*Our position is ____, so the feeling is ____, because ____.*” If you can’t draw it, the emotional layer is decoration – fix it before any design.
- 5** **Run the two physical tests.** Perform: list three things you could do (not say) to make people feel it. Signature: crop your logo and name – would anyone still know it’s you?

RECAP

- Brand is the emotional response your position earns – a pattern stored in memory, not a logo.
- Looks branded ≠ has a brand. The real brand survives the logo being cropped out.
- Own one feeling and one archetype, and perform rather than state them.
- The emotional layer must dramatize the position, not float free of it – or it’s a costume.
- Build embodiment first; the assets are only its expression.

RECALL – FIVE QUESTIONS

Q1 What is a brand, if it isn't the logo and colors – and why do people confuse the two?

Q2 Why must a brand project one dominant character instead of several?

Q3 What does “perform the feeling, don't state it” mean? Give an example.

Q4 What is the coherence check, and what failure does it catch?

Q5 Take a brand you know: name the position underneath, the feeling on top, and whether the feeling dramatizes the position or floats free of it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Culture, Tribe & Belonging

8

When a brand stops being a product and becomes a world people join

*“In an infinite content world,
belonging is the moat.”*

EKRAM

**WHAT THIS
CHAPTER DOES**

The deepest brands don't stop at an emotional character (Chapter 7). They become cultures — tribes with shared values, rules, and an identity people want to step into.

THE CORE DOCTRINE

The load-bearing claims

- 01 **Culture is part of the brand, not an internal side-topic.** The external brand can only be as strong as the internal culture that produces it — you can't project outward what you don't possess inward.

- 02 **Belonging is a moat.** A community with real membership is something a rival can't fork. When products are infinite, belonging is the scarce, defensible thing.

- 03 **The strongest brands give people an identity to step into.** The deepest question isn't "what does this sell?" — it's "who do I become if I join?"

- 04 **Tribes run on unwritten rules** — what's admired and what's "cringe" — far more than on written values statements.

- 05 **Culture must reinforce the position and brand.** When the inside contradicts the outside, the brand collapses at the seam.

LINEAGE

"culture eats strategy" is widely (and contestedly) attributed to Drucker; "build insideout" traces to Cunningham. The framings of belonging-as-moat, "who am I becoming," and unwritten-rules-encode-values are Ekram's.

What "culture" actually means here

Not ping-pong tables, not a values poster, not HR language. Culture is the real shared beliefs and behaviors of the people inside and around the brand — what they actually do, admire, and reject.

Why it's part of the brand and not a side quest: your brand is the response the market has to your signals (Ch 2, 7), and your signals are produced by your culture. A team that doesn't believe the brand can't perform it convincingly — "people execute culture, not slide decks." And when a brand is discovered by a culture that already shares its values, it spreads by resonance, not persuasion — far cheaper and far stickier.

That's what "culture eats strategy" means operationally: you can write a brilliant brand strategy, but if the culture doesn't live it, nothing happens — and if the culture contradicts

it, the market feels the lie. Culture eats strategy only when internal behavior matches the external position. When they conflict, the brand loses.

Tribe and belonging: from utility to identity

A product solves a problem. A tribe answers a question: who am I, and who am I becoming?

The strongest brands sell becoming, not features.

This is why belonging beats attention as a moat. Attention is rented and fleeting; belonging is owned and durable. Once someone's identity is wrapped up in your brand, they don't churn over a feature comparison — leaving would cost them part of who they are. That's an identity-level switching cost, and it's the deepest moat there is.

How a tribe forms:

- a shared belief big enough to organize around,
- a clear in-group and out-group (us, and the them we're not),
- and symbols, rituals, and language that signal membership.

People want a flag to wave and a group to stand with. So the design question isn't "what features do we add?" but "who does someone get to become by joining us?" Define that identity and make membership a clearer answer to it than the alternatives. (Hierarchy and tiers, incidentally, are welcomed when they confer identity — people will happily climb a ladder that says something about who they are.)

Unwritten rules: the real constitution of a tribe

A tribe is defined less by the values on its website than by the rules no one posted — the norms everyone just knows. What's admired, what's mocked, what's rewarded, what's rejected.

The fastest way to read a culture's rules is to learn what it calls cringe. In Web3, intellectual dishonesty is cringe; a suit at a San Francisco startup is cringe; a heartfelt personal post on LinkedIn is "off." None of it is written down, and all of it governs behavior.

Two things make unwritten rules powerful:

- They encode values. Every rule smuggles in a belief. (At Ecstatic Dance, three rules — no shoes, no talking, no drugs — quietly say: the primal form matters, non-verbal connection matters, being on the same frequency matters.)

- They self-police. The community enforces them, which lets a culture scale without a moderator — every member becomes a guardian of the norm. (It's why every Reddit subreddit can hold its own distinct, durable culture.)

The lesson: a values statement that doesn't change what gets admired or mocked is decoration.

The real culture is the unwritten rulebook — so set it on purpose.

How culture and brand reinforce each other

Keep two layers distinct:

- Chapter 7 = the outward feeling the brand performs — the emotional character a stranger picks up.
- Chapter 8 = the inward membership logic — the identity and rules that make people belong.

The outward feeling attracts; the inward belonging retains and turns members into evangelists.

A brand that performs a feeling but offers no identity to join is a vibe with no retention. A tribe with no compelling outward character stays invisible. The strongest brands do both — and both point back at the position:

Position (what you are) → Brand (how it feels) → Culture (who you become by joining)

— all three aimed at the same thing.

When those align, they compound. When the culture says something different from the brand or the position, the market senses the seam and the whole thing wobbles.

EXAMPLES

CRYPTO

Bitcoin

- Emotionally (Ch 7): autonomy – freedom from anyone’s permission.
- Socially (the identity): you become a sovereign individual, part of a hard-money revolution. “Bitcoiner” is something you are, not a product you use.
- The culture that holds it: unwritten rules everyone knows – HODL, “not your keys, not your coins,” “have fun staying poor,” maximalism, scorn for shitcoins. The belonging is the moat: a bitcoiner doesn’t switch to a technically faster coin, because their identity is invested. You can fork the code; you can’t fork the tribe.

NON-CRYPTO

Liquid Death

Water is the ultimate commodity – there is no product moat. So Liquid Death built a tribe instead of a feature.

- **Emotionally:** irreverence, rebellion – “Murder Your Thirst.”
- **Socially:** you’re in on the joke, anti-corporate, a member of the “Country Club.” People literally tattoo the logo.
- **The culture:** one relentless unwritten rule – nothing may sound like normal corporate marketing; break it and it’s instantly “off-brand.”

The belonging is the differentiation; in a commodity, the world people join is the only moat there is.

In both, notice the same stack: a feeling on the outside, an identity in the middle, a rulebook holding it together – all coherent with the position.

Common mistakes & misreadings

- 1** **Confusing community size with belonging.** 100,000 Discord members who feel nothing are an audience, not a tribe. A small group that would tattoo your logo beats a big one that forgets you tomorrow.
- 2** **Manufacturing a tribe without real values.** You can't astroturf belonging. A tribe forms around a genuine shared belief; fake values plus a Discord is a ghost town with a logo. (Beware "community-first" — it's often a mask for an undifferentiated product.)
- 3** **"Values" that don't shape behavior.** A values page nobody acts on is decoration. The real culture is what's actually rewarded and punished; when stated values and real incentives disagree, incentives win.
- 4** **A culture that conflicts with the position.** A "serious, trustless infrastructure" project with a careless, chaotic internal culture undermines its own claim. The market feels the contradiction.

APPLY IT — DO THIS NOW

- 1** **Name the identity.** Finish the sentence: "*If you join us, you become someone who ____.*" If you can't, you have a product, not a tribe.
- 2** **Name the in-group and the out-group.** Who belongs — and who explicitly doesn't? A tribe needs both.
- 3** **Write your unwritten rules.** List three things that are "cringe" here and three that earn status. That list, not your values page, is your real culture.
- 4** **Audit what behavior actually gets rewarded.** Does it match the identity you just named — or contradict it?
- 5** **Run the coherence check, inside-out.** Do the people inside actually live the feeling the brand performs and the position claims? If not, fix the culture before you spend another dollar on the brand.

RECAP

- Culture is part of the brand, and the outside can't be stronger than the inside.
 - Belonging is a moat — an identity-level switching cost a rival can't fork.
 - The deepest brands answer “who do I become if I join?” — they sell identity, not utility.
 - Tribes run on unwritten rules (the cringe test), which encode values and self-police.
 - The stack must cohere: position → brand → culture, all aimed at the same thing.
-

A product is something people use; a tribe is someone people become — and belonging is the moat you can't fork.

RECALL – FIVE QUESTIONS

- Q1 Why is culture part of the brand rather than an internal side-topic?
-
- Q2 Why is belonging a more durable moat than attention?
-
- Q3 What's the "cringe test," and why do unwritten rules often matter more than written values?
-
- Q4 Explain the difference between the outward feeling (Ch 7) and the inward membership logic (Ch 8) – and how they reinforce each other.
-
- Q5 Take a brand you know: what identity does it offer, who's its out-group, and name one unwritten rule of its tribe.

CHAPTER NINE

Narrative as the Frontline

9

The story that compresses your strategy and pulls a future forward

*“If the war is attention,
narrative is the frontline.”*

EKRAM

**WHAT THIS
CHAPTER DOES**

You have a position (Chapters 2–6), a brand (7), and a culture (8).
Narrative is what carries all three through time.

THE CORE DOCTRINE

The load-bearing claims

- 01 **Strategy is story** — not literally (strategy is also allocation, sacrifice, sequencing), but because story is how strategy becomes legible, coordinated, and repeatable. Narrative compresses everything you do into one idea a stranger can repeat.

- 02 **Narrative is the frontline of the attention war.** Control your narrative, or it controls you.

- 03 **The strongest narratives are about a future, not a product.** You're not selling a thing; you're pulling a future forward.

- 04 **One narrative, held for years, compounds.** Everyone repeating the same story is how you accumulate mindshare. Switching resets it to zero.

- 05 **Narrative needs tension to move.** A story with no conflict doesn't travel.

LINEAGE

Jobs/Cunningham (the storyteller) and Soros/Thiel (reflexivity) underneath; narrative singularity, narrative-market-fit, and the future-delta test are Ekram's.

What narrative actually is – and isn't

Narrative is not “telling stories.” It's not a slogan, not your content calendar, not a founder anecdote. Those are outputs; narrative is the engine.

A narrative is the single, directional story that ties your position, brand, and culture into one idea about where the world is going and your role in it. Ekram's reframe: don't think of narrative as stories – think of it as positioning.

The cleanest way to see it: your position is a static claim (“the first modular blockchain network”); your narrative is the moving story that carries that claim through time (“the world is going modular, the old way is breaking, and we're leading the shift”). Position is the noun; narrative is the verb that spreads it. It's the container that makes positioning travel – the thing your team, your users, and the press can all repeat in the same words. When everyone tells the same story, you have mindshare. When everyone tells a different one, you have noise.

One narrative, held for years

A narrative only compounds if it stays the same long enough to. The goal is narrative singularity – team, users, press, even competitors, all repeating your one story. That repetition, held over years, is how a story hardens into mindshare.

Which is why switching is fatal: no amount of money can save a brand that changes its narrative and messaging every six months. Every reset throws away the compounding and confuses the people just starting to learn your story. The reflexive rebrand – the urge to refresh the message because you're bored of it – is the enemy. You will be sick of your narrative long before the market has even heard it. Hold the line in years, not quarters.

Future, not product

The strongest narratives point at a future state, not a feature. People rally to a future they want to live in; nobody rallies to a spec sheet. A product matters – but it becomes far more powerful attached to a larger future. “We make X” is a vendor. “We're pulling forward a world where Y” is a movement.

The diagnostic is the future-delta test: if your company vanished tomorrow, what future would no longer happen – or get pushed further away? If the honest answer is “a product goes away,” you're a vendor. If it's “a whole future recedes,” you have a narrative.

One caution, carried from Chapter 14: “every company exists twice — once as reality, once as the story people tell about it.” The story is allowed to lead the reality (in frontier markets, narrative-market-fit can arrive before product-market-fit) — but reality has to redeem it, or the widening gap becomes a lie. Narrative that runs ahead of the product is a tool; narrative that runs ahead with no plan to catch up is a fraud.

Tension: what makes a story move

A narrative with no tension is a pleasant vision nobody repeats. Stories travel on conflict.

Tension can come from:

- a broken present — the status quo is failing,
- a danger — a future to avoid,
- an enemy — a clear “them” to your “us,” or
- a future worth fighting for — a world to build.

The simplest, most durable shape is: the present is broken → here’s the better future → we pull it forward. That gives the audience a side to take and a reason to repeat you. A narrative with real tension earns a conversation — and at its best a debate — that happens above your brand, with people arguing in your terms. (Choosing and naming a specific enemy is its own discipline — that’s Chapter 10. Here, just know that without tension, the story sits still.)

Make it travel: vividness and repetition

Once the narrative is right, three things make it travel — this is transmission, not construction, so get the story right first:

- A vivid behavioral image beats an argument. One concrete, repeatable image dramatizes a story better than a deck — Elon sleeping on the factory floor encodes “relentless” in a single picture. Find the one true image that carries your narrative and let people pass it around.
- An extreme (true) comparison resets the frame. “Fewer than a dozen of these machines can out-scan every MRI on Earth” forces the listener to drop the old reference point. One well-chosen comparison re-anchors how big or new your thing feels.
- Repetition is the craft. Consistency isn’t saying it once — it’s saying one thing in a hundred fresh forms until it’s subconscious. Solana said “speed kills” across every surface it owned.

Say the same story enough ways, spaced over time, that the market can’t not know it.

(And resist over-explaining — say the one thing, then stop; over-explaining hands the

narrative back.)

EXAMPLES

CRYPTO

Ethereum

- The narrative: not “a smart-contract platform” (product) but “the world computer” — an open, unstoppable, decentralized future for the internet and money.
 - The future it points to: a permissionless world where applications and finance run without gatekeepers.
 - Why it’s durable: held for roughly a decade with real tension (against the centralized internet and traditional finance). The product — the EVM — became vastly bigger by being attached to a future people wanted to live in. It passes the future-delta test: if Ethereum vanished, an entire vision of an open internet recedes.
-

NON-CRYPTO

Tesla

- The narrative: never “we sell electric cars.” It was “accelerate the world’s transition to sustainable energy.”
- The future it points to: a post-fossil-fuel world — with the danger of climate collapse as the tension.
- Why it’s durable: the product (a car) became a movement because it was chained to a planetary future and a clear enemy (the fossil-fuel status quo). Held for over a decade, future-first, tension-rich. A car nobody would rally around became a mission millions did.

Both show the pattern: a product made enormous by the future it’s attached to, a story with built-in tension, and the discipline to hold it for years.

Common mistakes & misreadings

- 1** **Confusing narrative with a slogan.** A slogan is a line; a narrative is a directional story about a future. A slogan can express a narrative — it isn't one.
- 2** **Changing the narrative too often.** Every reset returns the compounding to zero. Boredom is not a reason to rebrand.
- 3** **A story with no tension.** No broken present, no enemy, no stakes — pleasant, and unrepeatable.
- 4** **All product, no future.** Talking only about the thing you make, never the world it advances. A vendor (fails the future-delta test).
- 5** **A narrative detached from reality.** A story so far ahead of the product that the gap becomes a lie, with no plan to redeem it.

APPLY IT — DO THIS NOW

- 1** **Run the future-delta test.** Finish: “*If we vanished tomorrow, the future that would no longer happen is ____.*” If the answer is just “our product,” you don't have a narrative yet.
- 2** Write the one story in three beats: *the present is broken because ____ → the better future is ____ → we pull it forward by ____.*
- 3** **Find the tension.** Name the broken present, the danger, or the enemy your story moves against. No tension, no movement.
- 4** **Audit for singularity.** Read your last 6–12 months of public comms. Is it one story told many ways — or a different story every quarter? If it's resetting, stop and recommit to one.
- 5** **Find your vivid image.** What single, true, repeatable image or comparison carries your narrative? If you don't have one, you have an argument, not a story.

RECAP

- Strategy is story, and narrative is the container that makes your positioning travel through time.
 - Hold one narrative for years — singularity compounds; switching resets to zero.
 - The strongest narratives are about a future, not a product (the future-delta test).
 - A narrative needs tension to move and a vivid image + relentless repetition to stick.
 - Narrative may lead reality — but reality must redeem it.
-

Pick one true story about a future worth pulling forward, give it tension, and repeat it for years until the market tells it back to you.

RECALL – FIVE QUESTIONS

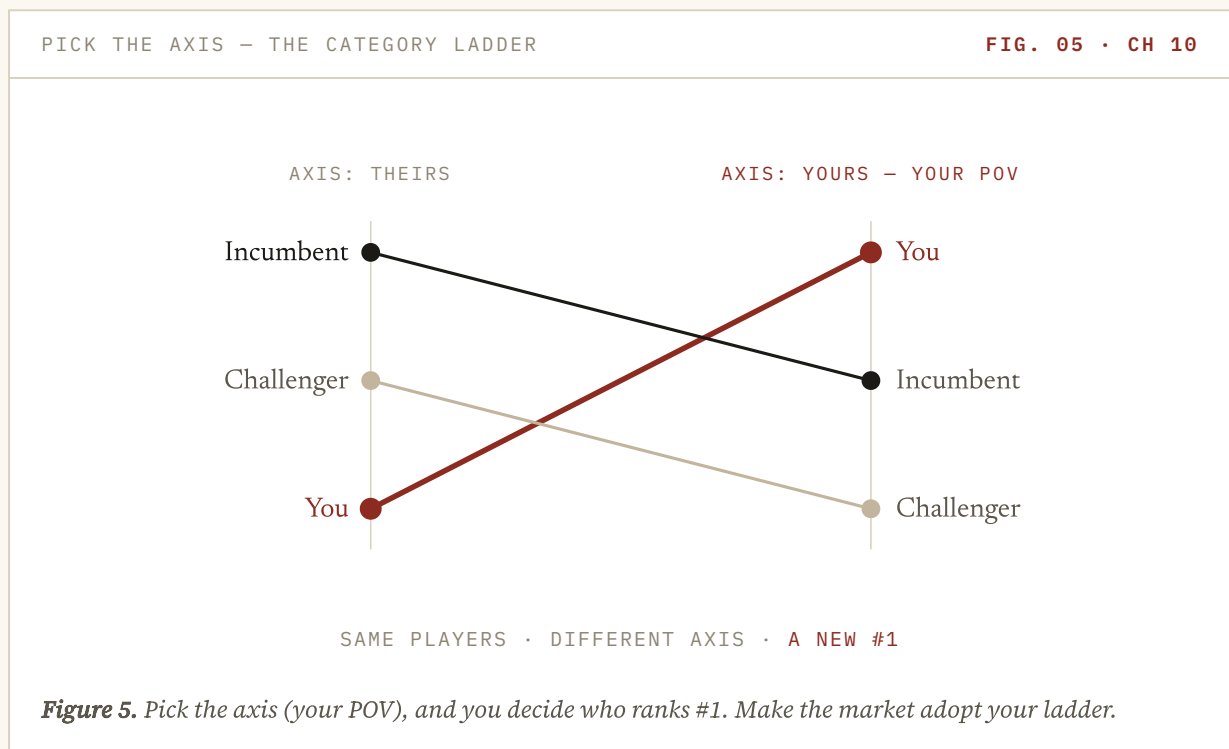
- Q1 Why is narrative “the container that makes positioning travel,” and how is it different from a slogan?
-
- Q2 What is the future-delta test, and what does it reveal?
-
- Q3 Why does changing your narrative every six months destroy compounding?
-
- Q4 Where can a narrative’s tension come from – and what happens to a story without it?
-
- Q5 Take a company you know: state its narrative in three beats (broken present → future → how it pulls it forward), and run the future-delta test on it.

CHAPTER TEN

Competing in the Mind: Challenge or Create the Category

10

Choosing the right battle – and the right enemy



“The best way to kill your competitor is to make them feel historical. Mark them as early, not evil.” – Ekram

WHAT THIS
CHAPTER DOES

Chapter 9 gave your story tension. This chapter is where you choose the fight that tension is about.

THE CORE DOCTRINE

The load-bearing claims

- 01 **Brands compete in the mind, not just the market.** The fight is over definitions, comparisons, and frames — not only features.

- 02 **Contrast creates relevance — and conflict is its sharpest form.** A brand the market can't set against anything is invisible. Being attacked is one signal of contrast, not a law (plenty of brands matter with little public attack); the real alarm is the absence of any contrast at all.

- 03 **Categories are weapons.** You either fight inside an existing frame or redefine it — and whoever defines the frame wins disproportionate power.

- 04 **The right enemy sharpens the story.** What you stand against is half your positioning.

- 05 **“Early, not evil” beats attacking.** The strongest move is usually to make the incumbent the respected past while you become the future.

LINEAGE

Ries & Trout (Duality, the Opposite), Hoffer/Bernays (the common enemy), Sun Tzu (choose the ground), Helmer (counter-positioning). “Early, not evil” and “authority lives in the past” are Ekram’s.

Competition is a fight over frames, not features

Product comparison is the surface. The real fight is over the frame — the comparison the market uses to judge everyone. Decide the axis of comparison, or the category itself, and you’ve often won before a single feature is examined. As Ekram puts it: the most powerful people don’t win the argument — they decide what the argument is about.

Why definitions beat features: the market can’t hold a hundred specs, but it holds a frame — a category, a comparison, a story of old versus new. Own the frame and every competitor argues in your language, reinforcing you just by participating. Lose it and you spend your life explaining yourself inside someone else’s terms.

So the strategic question is never “are we better?” It’s “what’s the comparison — and who set it?”

The stack, defined once. Four terms the last two chapters have circled — keep them

distinct:

- Narrative — the directional story about the future (Chapter 9).
- Tension — the force that gives that story motion.
- Enemy — the concrete embodiment of that tension.
- Frame — the comparison structure through which the market judges the conflict.

The hierarchy is the point: competition is frame control; enemy selection is how frame control becomes legible; and everything else in this chapter — challenger moves, category creation — is a subordinate expression of seizing the frame. If a tactic isn't changing the comparison the market uses, it isn't doing this chapter's job.

The enemy is not always a company

Conflict gives your story tension (Chapter 9) and your audience a side. But the enemy is simply whatever you define yourself against — and the best ones often aren't companies at all. Think of it as five levels the enemy can live at, from a named actor down to an invisible assumption.

They aren't parallel objects; they're depths:

1. A rival (an actor) — the market leader.
2. The status quo (a behavior) — “the way it's done now.”
3. An old category (a frame) — monolithic chains, on-prem software, gas cars.
4. An incumbent model (a structural logic) — the profitable old way the leader can't abandon.
5. A worldview (an assumption) — a belief the market holds (“you need a bank,” “decentralization has to be slow”).

The deeper the level, the harder the enemy is to defend — and the bigger the frame you get to redraw. Pick the one that gives the sharpest, most legible contrast, and that you can credibly beat.

Challenger moves (subordinate to the frame)

These are just frame-control tactics for the smaller player — ways to seize the comparison when you aren't the leader:

- Only acknowledge the market leader. Name #1 and no one else: it borrows their altitude and collapses the field into a two-horse race with you as the chosen challenger. Naming smaller rivals only elevates them.

- Be the opposite of Goliath, down to the aesthetics — Lyft pink against Uber’s black. The audience already understands the leader, so being their inverse is instantly legible and free to communicate.
- Watch for the absence of contrast. If no one can argue for or against you, you’re invisible. Being attacked is one sign you matter — not the only one — but no reaction at all is the real alarm.
- Never punch down. As the bigger player, attacking a smaller one hands them the Davidvs-Goliath frame. Starve them of attention instead.

Altitude decides which apply: challengers manufacture an enemy to borrow relevance; leaders project security and welcome rivals.

Make them historical: “early, not evil”

Here is the most elegant competitive move in the method. Don’t attack the incumbent — freeze them in time. Publicly honor them as the pioneer who came first, then quietly establish that the world has changed and their model no longer maps. They become the respected past; you become the now.

Why it beats attacking:

- A direct attack triggers tribal defense — their fans rally — and reads as insecure, which itself signals weakness.
- Praise is undefendable. No one can argue against being called foundational, so there’s no counter-move.
- It’s pure counter-positioning: they can’t copy your frame without disowning their own legacy.

The mechanism underneath: authority lives in the past; the present is still negotiable. You concede them the finished past — honor, closure, the museum — and keep the open present and the future for yourself. Anthropic does exactly this to OpenAI: never “they’re reckless,” but an implied “they came first, and now the world needs what comes next.”

Category creation as a competitive move

The ultimate frame move is to create the category itself. Chapter 5 covered whether to — the choice and its costs. Here the point is narrower: category creation matters because it changes the battle. It’s how you stop fighting on a rival’s axis and force the contest onto ground where you’re already #1.

But a category only works as a weapon if it obeys the logic of conflict:

- A new category needs an enemy. “Modular is nothing without its constant compare-and-contrast with monolithic.” The category is the frame; the old category it replaces is the opponent. No antagonist, no tension — and a frame with no opponent is just a label nobody repeats.
- A category of one is weak. A frame only has power if others are forced to operate inside it — that’s the whole thesis of this chapter. A category containing only you isn’t a battlefield; it’s a marketing claim. So you invite rivals in: “no such thing as a category of one — invite folks, and the category takes life.”
- Teaching the category is winning the frame. You haven’t created a category until the market argues in your words. The years of repetition aren’t overhead — they’re how the frame gets installed in enough minds to count.

Create a category not because it’s novel, but because it lets you author the comparison — and a comparison you authored is one you’ve already won.

EXAMPLES

CRYPTO

Polymarket (author the comparison)

Polymarket didn't fight other betting or polling products on their terms. It created the frame of prediction markets for real-world events and set the comparison itself: markets price truth; pundits just talk. The enemy isn't a company — it's the status quo of unaccountable opinion (polls, talking heads). By authoring that comparison, it made every election-night argument happen on its turf. The move: create the category, then define the contrast you win on.

EXAMPLE

Tech — Anthropic vs. OpenAI (reframe the incumbent as the past)

Anthropic never calls OpenAI evil. It positions as the safety-first lab — implying OpenAI was the pioneer that came first, while the world has now moved to needing something more responsible. OpenAI is honored into the past; Anthropic claims the present. “Early, not evil,” run cleanly — undefendable, and far stronger than an attack.

EXAMPLE

The cautionary case — Meta and “the metaverse”

Meta ran the same playbook and it failed — which is more instructive than the wins. It tried to create a category (“the metaverse”), name an enemy (the flat 2D internet), and seize the frame for the next computing platform — even renaming the company to own it. The frame play was real; the reality wasn't there to redeem it. The product (clunky VR) ran years behind the story, the market never adopted the comparison, and the frame curdled into a liability the company quietly walked back. Chapter 9's rule holds at the category level too: a frame the reality can't back becomes a trap, not a moat.

Across the three: authoring the comparison wins (Polymarket); reframing the incumbent as the past wins (Anthropic); a frame that outruns reality loses (Meta). Choosing the battle is necessary — being able to back it is what makes the choice safe.

Common mistakes & misreadings

- 1** **Attacking the wrong enemy.** Picking a rival you can't beat, or one nobody cares about, instead of the frame-defining enemy (the leader, or the status quo).
- 2** **Choosing no enemy at all.** No antagonist, no tension — and no-FUD means irrelevance.
- 3** **Trashing instead of reframing.** Direct attacks trigger defense and read insecure; “they're early” beats “they're bad.”
- 4** **Looking disruptive with no frame shift.** The aesthetics of a challenger — edgy copy, bold colors — without actually changing the comparison. A costume.

APPLY IT — DO THIS NOW

- 1** **Name the battle.** What comparison does the market currently use to judge you? That's the frame you're in.
- 2** **Choose the enemy.** From the five types — rival, status quo, old category, incumbent model, worldview — pick the one that gives the sharpest contrast and that you can beat.
- 3** **Decide: fight inside the frame, or redefine it?** If redefining, name the old category you're making obsolete.
- 4** **Set the comparison you want.** Write the two-horse race or old-vs-new sentence you want the market to repeat.
- 5** **Choose how the incumbent should be perceived** — dangerous, weak, outdated, or early.

Usually “early/outdated” is strongest, because it's undefendable.

RECAP

- Brands compete in the mind — the fight is over frames and comparisons, not just features.
 - Contrast creates relevance (conflict is its sharpest form); no enemy, no salience. But the enemy is often the status quo, an old category, or a worldview — not a company.
 - Whoever defines the frame wins disproportionate power.
 - “Early, not evil” — make the incumbent the past and claim the present; stronger and more elegant than attacking.
 - Category creation is a weapon, but it needs an enemy, can’t be a category of one, and must be taught for years.
-

*Don’t fight to be better inside someone else’s frame
— choose the enemy and the comparison that
make you the future and the incumbent the past.*

RECALL – FIVE QUESTIONS

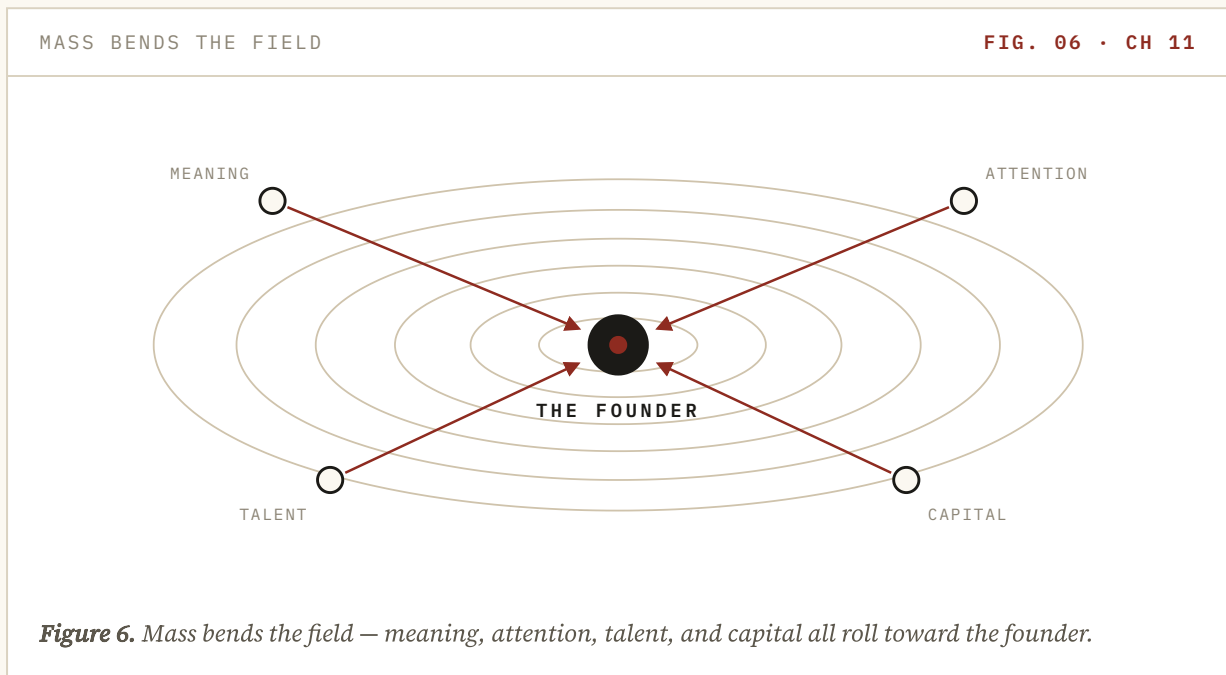
- Q1 Why do brands compete “in the mind,” and what does it mean to win the frame rather than the feature comparison?
-
- Q2 Name the five kinds of enemy. Why is the enemy often not a company?
-
- Q3 Why is “early, not evil” stronger than attacking a competitor directly? Give the psychological reasons.
-
- Q4 Why does a created category need an enemy, and why is a “category of one” weak?
-
- Q5 Take a company you know: name its real enemy, the comparison it wants the market to make, and whether it’s defining the frame or trapped in someone else’s.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Founder as Symbol

11

Concentrating the brand into one uncopyable human



“Products can be copied. Symbols can’t.” – Ekram

**WHAT THIS
CHAPTER DOES**

The brand now has a position, a feeling, a culture, a narrative, and a frame. This chapter gives it a face.

THE CORE DOCTRINE

The load-bearing claims

- 01 **People bond to people, not org charts.** A human face gives the brand a character to follow.
- 02 **Products can be copied; symbols can't.** A person is the one asset no competitor can fork.
- 03 **The founder is a lightning rod** — they concentrate the market's attention and emotion, and they absorb both the adoration and the attacks. Taking the hits is the job, not a side effect.
- 04 **Raw beats polished.** Unfiltered conviction is scarce and reads as authentic; polish reads as PR. Pushed far enough, conviction plus community becomes devotion.
- 05 **It's not just the founder — it's who echoes them.** Your visible inner circle is read as a signal of your quality.

LINEAGE

Le Bon/Bernays (crowds need a figure), Machiavelli (judge a ruler by those around him), Girard (mimetic desire); “symbols can't be copied” and “main character mode” are Ekram's.

Why a human symbol

You cannot bond to a logo the way you bond to a person. A face gives the market's attention a place to land and its emotion a target — it is easier to connect with a person than with an idea. (Inside crypto, people connect with the founder first and the protocol second.)

And it closes the loop on the moat. You can fork a product, clone a feature, even copy a brand's aesthetics — but you cannot copy a person. A human is the one genuinely unforkable asset a company has. So one of the strongest possible brand states is concentration into a human symbol — immensely powerful and, as we'll see, immensely dangerous. Not every great brand is built this way; but the ones that are become very hard to copy.

The lightning rod

A founder-symbol does two jobs at once:

- Concentrate — gather the market’s scattered attention and emotion into one legible figure.
- Absorb — take the adoration and the attacks. The lightning strikes the rod, not the building.

This is why a symbol must be a character, not a spokesperson. A spokesperson reads approved copy and deflects; a character holds a real point of view, takes positions, and is willing to be a target. Only a character can absorb a strike — and absorbing strikes is precisely what shields the rest of the brand. (Ekram calls running point this way “main character mode” — the marketing analogue of founder mode.)

Raw, imperfect, and — sometimes — deified

Three things compound here, in order.

Rawness signals reality. A founder who says what they actually think signals conviction; a media-trained one signals PR, which the market discounts on sight (and exposing a real flaw humanizes — the pratfall effect). The constraint: rawness only works when it expresses a coherent person — a consistent point of view — not random impulsiveness. Loud and sloppy isn’t authentic; it’s just loud.

Costly conviction earns belief. Underneath the rawness is belief ahead of consensus — conviction held before any external validation, and the nerve to endure social disbelief while you’re early. Not mania; calibrated conviction. You can’t take the visible, costly risks that earn belief without first believing past the evidence — and if your stated ambition doesn’t make sober people a little uncomfortable, you’re probably under-risking.

Over time, belief can become devotion. Real conviction, a real community, and years of consistency can tip into public, irrational devotion — the founder is deified. That’s one of the most powerful states a brand can reach, and one of the most fragile (see Do Kwon).

Sidebar — the Perception Primer

These levers are downstream of the symbol, not the reason for it: the founder concentrates meaning first; the attention, emotion, and effects below follow from that — never the reverse.

The mechanics (cataloged in the appendix; used here only as the engine):

- **Mimetic desire (Girard):** people copy who they admire, so a desirable symbol manufactures wanting — show the right person doing the thing and the wanting spreads.
- **Comparative perception:** the brain decides what you are by what you're set against, so a founder can anchor the brand to a higher class (“the Stripe of X”).
- **Status arbitrage / triangulation:** stand beside higher-status peers and the market files you at their level — inherit status before you earn it.
- **Risk signature:** people discount your words and price the risks you take in public; visible, costly risk is the conviction signal words can't fake. (Ekram credits Thiel; treat it as his framing.)

These levers are powerful and eminently manipulable — which is exactly why where the line sits is its own discussion (see the epilogue, “Where the Line Is”).

It's who echoes you — extend the field

Concentration and distribution sound contradictory; they aren't. The founder is the center of gravity; the court extends the field. A symbol is amplified by its inner circle, because credibility is transitive: a sharp, vocal, credible court creates social gravity; a silent or mediocre one dims the whole brand. You judge a ruler by the people around him — it's not what you say, it's who says it with you.

So concentrate the meaning in the founder, but don't hoard the voice: let your people build real personal brands and post in their own. More credible voices mean more narrative surface area — the field widens without the center moving. The real danger is timidity: companies afraid to let employees have personal brands get out-shouted by the ones that aren't.

(Two quick notes. A symbol is built over years, not weeks — optimize for the decade-long reputation, not the weekly dunk. And the founder's nonverbal delivery is part of the symbol: a confident chuckle can reframe a hostile question for free — the carrier carries meaning the words don't.)

EXAMPLES

CRYPTO

you can fork the chain, not the founder

Ethereum's code was literally forked, and the copy went nowhere. The sharpest reason why: you can copy the protocol, but you cannot copy Vitalik — the unpolished, almost monkish figure the brand concentrates into. The symbol is the part that doesn't fork.

NON-CRYPTO

Steve Jobs (the symbol that outlived the man)

Apple concentrated its brand into one human with an unmistakable point of view — a character, never a spokesperson, who absorbed both worship and attack. The symbol grew so strong it outlived him: Apple still channels the Jobs myth years on. That's the ceiling of the founder-symbol — a human meaning durable enough to survive the human.

EXAMPLE

The cautionary case — Do Kwon (the rod cuts both ways)

Terra concentrated its brand in Do Kwon's bravado and conviction, and for a while it worked exactly as this chapter describes. Then the system collapsed and the founder fell — and because the brand was the man, it fell with him. Concentrating a brand in a person is maximum power and maximum fragility at once. The lightning rod absorbs the strike — until the strike destroys the rod.

Common mistakes & misreadings

- 1** **A spokesperson, not a character.** A polished mouthpiece can't be a symbol — no point of view to bond to, and it can't absorb a hit.
- 2** **Over-polishing the founder.** Sanding off the warts kills the conviction signal. Raw reads as real; perfect reads as PR.
- 3** **Forgetting the rod cuts both ways.** Tie the brand to a human and the human's failures become the brand's. Concentrate with eyes open (Do Kwon).
- 4** **Hoarding the brand in one person.** No disciples, muzzled employees — fewer voices, less gravity. Distribute it.
- 5** **Manufacturing a cult without the conviction.** You can't fake deification; it's earned over years through real belief and real community. "Cult" is an outcome, not a tactic.

APPLY IT – DO THIS NOW

- 1** **Name the symbol.** Which single human does the brand concentrate into? If the answer is “the company,” you don’t have a symbol yet.
- 2** **Character or spokesperson?** Does that person hold a real, public point of view – or recite approved copy? Make them a character.
- 3** **Pick the wart.** Choose one real imperfection to stop hiding. Polish is costing you conviction.
- 4** **List who echoes you.** Name your visible inner circle. Sharp and vocal, or silent and mid? Unmuzzle your people and let them build their own brands.
- 5** **Name the risk – both kinds.** What visible, costly risk will the symbol take (the signal words can’t fake)? And if this person fell tomorrow, what happens to the brand? Decide how much to concentrate versus distribute.

RECAP

- People bond to people: concentrate the brand into one human symbol.
- A symbol is the one asset no one can fork – the deepest moat there is.
- The founder is a lightning rod: they concentrate attention and absorb the hits. Be a character, not a spokesperson.
- Raw beats polished; conviction plus community, over years, becomes devotion.
- It’s who echoes you – distribute the brand; and remember the rod cuts both ways.

You can fork the product; you can’t fork the person – so put a real human forward, let them take the hits, and accept that the symbol’s power and its fragility are the same thing.

RECALL – FIVE QUESTIONS

- Q1 Why is a human symbol “the one asset no one can fork”?
-
- Q2 What are the two jobs of a lightning rod – and why does absorbing attacks matter?
-
- Q3 Why does raw, unpolished founder behavior beat a polished spokesperson?
-
- Q4 What does “it’s who echoes you” mean, and what’s the cost of hoarding the brand in the founder?
-
- Q5 Give a case where the founder-symbol destroyed the brand, and explain the risk it illustrates.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Winning Attention

12

Create it or borrow it – but earn it, never buy it

“If your position doesn’t earn attention, it’s a bad position.”

EKRAM

THE SEVEN FASCINATION TRIGGERS

FIG. 07 · CH 12

01 **Power** command attention by leading

02 **Passion** draw on emotion and sense

03 **Mystique** withhold to pull them in

04 **Prestige** earn rank and respect

05 **Alarm** create urgency, a clock

06 **Rebellion** break the expected rule

07 **Trust** consistency over time

Figure 7. Sally Hogshead’s seven triggers, as Ekram deploys them – each, owned consistently, becomes a felt signature.

**WHAT THIS
CHAPTER DOES**

Everything so far built what you are and what you mean — none of it matters if no one looks.

This chapter is the attention engine, and one discipline holds it together: attention is downstream of the brand, amplifying Chapters 2–11, never replacing them.

THE CORE DOCTRINE**The load-bearing claims**

- 01** **Attention is the scarcest input for narrative spread — and it’s earned, not bought.** If your position and brand can’t earn attention on their own, that’s a diagnosis, not a budget problem.

- 02** **You win attention two ways: create it or borrow it.** Create = intrinsic pull (rizz). Borrow = attach to an entity that already has it (bundle-and-breakaway).

- 03** **Content is air cover.** One perception-shifting piece scales one-to-many and pre-softens every later conversation.

- 04** **Attention amplifies the brand; it isn’t the brand.** Rizz and bundling on an empty position amplify nothing.

LINEAGE

the attention-economy idea (Simon; Davenport & Beck) and two-step flow (Lazarsfeld & Katz) underneath; rizz, bundle-and-breakaway, and meme the gigabrain are Ekram’s.

Earn it, don’t buy it

In a saturated feed, attention is the scarcest resource — a perfect position no one sees is worth nothing. But the test of a strong position is that it earns attention on its own. Paid reach is rented, and more importantly a tell: if you have to buy all your attention, the problem is usually upstream, in the position or the brand. Earned attention is the goal; paid is a patch.

So the first question is never “what’s the ad budget?” — it’s “why isn’t this earning attention by itself?”

There are two honest ways to win it.

Create attention: rizz

“Rizz” is intrinsic pull — make something so charged it stops the scroll. It’s sensory, energetic, desire-driven; the opposite of boring. Ekram’s blunt filter is “does it captivate?” — does the thing have enough charge to make someone stop and feel something?

Rizz isn’t a new feeling bolted on; it’s the brand’s emotional center (Chapter 7), dialed up enough to travel. Solana didn’t make infrastructure sound dutiful — it made building feel like a thrill (“eat glass,” rave-energy hacker houses), and that charge is what made nerdy infra un-ignorable. The bar is simple and unforgiving: stand out from the landscape of boring.

Most content is forgettable; rizz is what makes a piece impossible to scroll past.

Borrow attention: bundle and breakaway

Attention isn’t evenly spread — it clusters around certain people and ecosystems. You can borrow from that density:

- Bundle up — attach to a high-attention entity as a genuine complement, ride its wave, and absorb attention you couldn’t generate alone.
- Break away — once you have your own gravity, exit to your own narrative.

The integrity caveat is the whole game: latch onto something you’re genuinely relevant to, and convert the borrowed attention into real, owned value before you break away. Bundle with nothing underneath and you read as a parasite; break away with nothing built and you’re left with nothing.

The content that travels

Three forms do most of the work — and how to write them lives in the Language toolkit (appendix). Here it’s what spreads:

- Content is air cover. A single perception-shifting thread or essay scales one-to-many and softens the whole battlefield, so the ground game (sales, BD, partnerships) wins one-on-one. One piece that moves the frame can be worth a hundred outreach calls — so invest in a few of these, not only the 1:1 grind.
- Meme the gigabrain. Take a high-credibility, complex idea and compress it into an approachable, shareable form without losing the insight — marrying credibility with virality. People share it because it makes them look smart and connected. Just meme mindfully; a cringe meme cheapens the idea it carries.

- Target the audience's audience. Influence flows downhill. Market to the people who influence your audience, not the audience directly — a clip of a high-status third party is a Trojan horse into rooms you can't enter yourself.

EXAMPLES

CRYPTO

Polygon (borrow, then break away)

Polygon had no easy way to out-shout the layer-1s, so it borrowed: it positioned as an Ethereum scaling complement, rode Ethereum's enormous attention, and built real usage in the meantime. Then it broke away to its own "mass adoption" narrative. Borrowed attention, converted to owned value, then released — bundle-and-breakaway run cleanly.

NON-CRYPTO

Duolingo (create, out of a boring category)

Language learning is a dutiful category, so Duolingo created attention rather than waiting to earn it the slow way. The move wasn't "post memes" — it was finding a real emotional center (the guilt-tripping, faintly unhinged persistence of the owl) and dialing it up until the brand itself stopped the scroll. The memes are the expression; the intrinsic pull is the point. That charge made a worthy-but-boring product un-ignorable — attention an earnest app would never have earned by playing it straight.

One borrowed its attention; one created it. Neither bought it.

Common mistakes & misreadings

- 1** **Paying to mask a weak position.** Buying reach or KOL spend instead of fixing why nothing earns attention on its own. Treat heavy paid dependence as a diagnosis.
- 2** **Rizz with nothing underneath.** Captivating content over an empty position is noise that converts no one — you amplified zero.
- 3** **Bundle without breakaway, or without integrity.** A permanent appendage never builds its own gravity; an opportunistic latch reads as parasitic.
- 4** **Meme-ing away the insight (or the taste).** Dumbing a credible idea into a meme that loses the substance, or cringe that cheapens the brand.
- 5** **Talking to your audience instead of their audience.** Shouting at the people you want, not the people who move them.

APPLY IT — DO THIS NOW

- 1** **Run the earned-attention test.** Does your position earn attention with zero spend? If not, the fix is upstream — go back to the position, not the ad account.
- 2** **Decide: create or borrow.** Do you have intrinsic rizz, or should you bundle to an attention-dense entity you're genuinely relevant to?
- 3** **If create — find the rizz.** Take your brand's emotional center and ask what would make a piece un-ignorable. If it wouldn't stop your own scroll, it won't stop anyone's.
- 4** **If borrow — name the host and the breakaway.** Whose attention, what real value you'll build on it, and when and how you exit to your own narrative.
- 5** **Build one air-cover artifact.** The single perception-shifting piece that would pre-sell every future conversation — and aim it at your audience's audience.

RECAP

- Attention is the scarcest input for narrative spread — earn it, don't buy it; heavy paid dependence is a diagnosis, not a strategy.
- Win it two ways: create it (rizz) or borrow it (bundle-and-breakaway) — and convert borrowed attention into owned value.
- Content is air cover: a few perception-shifting pieces beat endless 1:1 grind; meme the gigabrain; target the audience's audience.
- Attention amplifies the brand — on an empty position, it amplifies nothing.

Make something worth looking at, or stand where people are already looking — but if you're paying for every glance, fix the position, not the budget.

RECALL – FIVE QUESTIONS

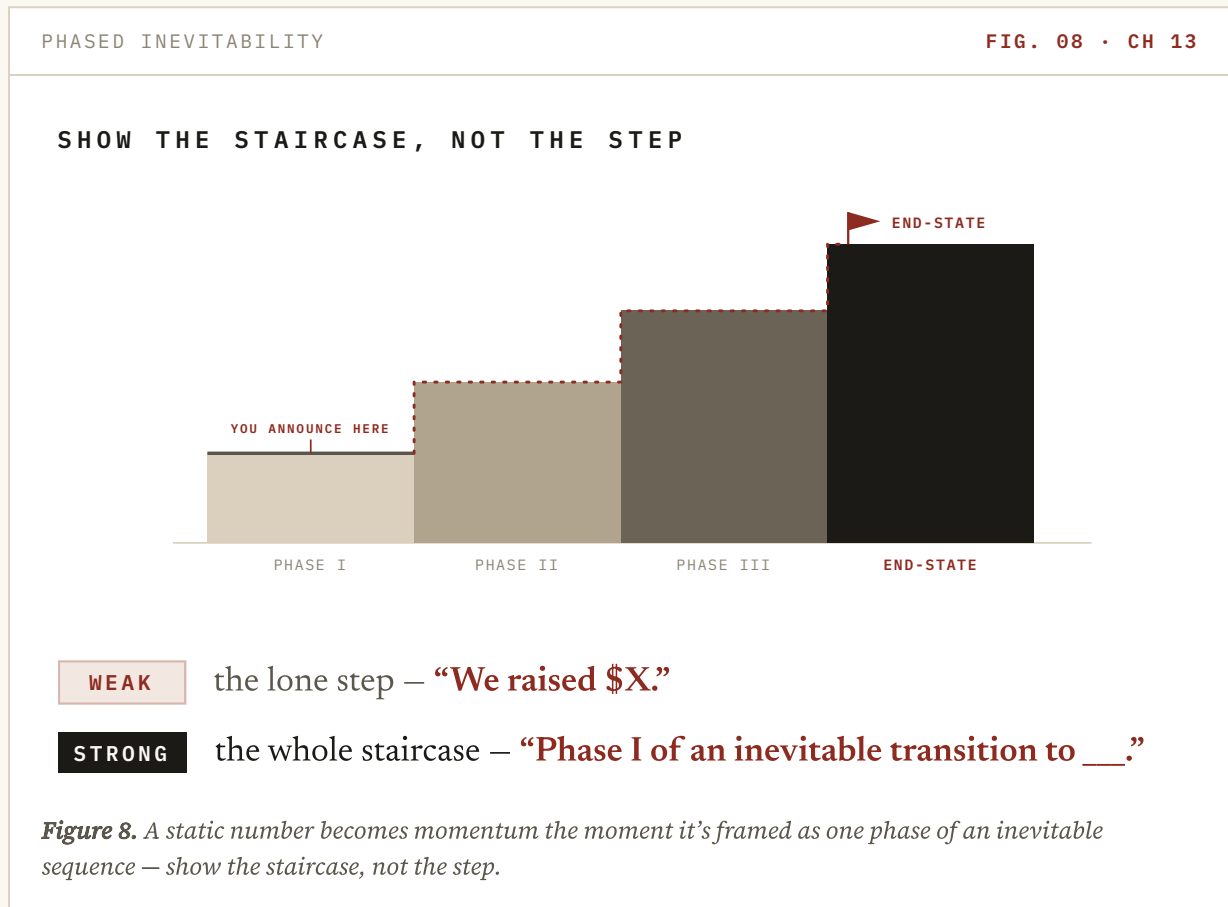
- Q1 Why is “earn it, don’t buy it” a diagnosis and not just a preference?
-
- Q2 What’s the difference between creating attention and borrowing it – and the core risk of each?
-
- Q3 What does “content is air cover” mean for how you spend marketing effort?
-
- Q4 What is “the audience’s audience,” and why market to them instead?
-
- Q5 Why does rizz on an empty position amplify nothing?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Distribution, Launches & Crisis

13

Delivery in three tempos: sustained, concentrated, under stress



“Crafting narrative and placing narrative are two different arts.” – Ekram

WHAT THIS
CHAPTER DOES

You’ve built the message (Chapters 2–11) and won attention for it (Chapter 12). This chapter is delivery in three tempos – distribution, launches, crisis – and its one discipline is that each mode runs on a principle, not a bag of tricks.

THE CORE DOCTRINE

The load-bearing claims

- 01 Delivery has three tempos: sustained (distribution), concentrated (launches), and under stress (crisis).

- 02 **Distribution** — own the pipe, don't rent the placement.

- 03 **Launches** — sell the trajectory, not the number, and own the timing.

- 04 **Crisis** — disclose first, fast, and fully; the cover-up does the real damage.

LINEAGE

crisis-comms doctrine (“get ahead of the story,” “it’s not the crime, it’s the cover-up”) and the owned-media idea underneath; Phased Inevitability, dunk-risk, coordination signal, and default reference are Ekram’s; the Tyson line below is his go-to for crisis. Where’s the line with Chapter 12? Ch 12 was the pull — what earns attention. This is the push — how the message is delivered, staged, and defended.

Distribution — sustained delivery

The everyday hum: getting your message in front of the market, continuously. The governing idea: distribution isn't reach — it's repeated, frame-setting access. Reach is how many people you touch once; access is the standing ability to set the terms again and again. That's what makes own the pipe deeper than “have a channel”: a pipe you own is frame-setting access you can use on demand.

- Own the pipe; don't just pitch it. A placement is rented and gone tomorrow; an owned channel — a show, a newsletter, a clip operation, a senior-run X account — is a standing asset that lets you set the frame on demand. Owning the pipe that shapes your category's conversation beats any single placement. (Increasingly, running the X account is a more important job than running media relations.)
- Go direct to the few who actually move your market. Most PR agencies insert a lowconviction middleman; the higher-leverage move is to cultivate, yourself, the handful of reporters and creators who shape perception. In the attention economy, the people who shape perception increasingly sit outside the formal press — and you earn them by being interesting, not by paying. (If you must hire help, ask three questions first: What's the laziest story the market could tell about us? Which one person disproportionately shapes perception here? What's the shortest path to becoming the default reference?)

- Match the medium’s physics. Channels have native formats and rhythms, and they shift; stale formats lose. Follow the shift — long-form into quiet mornings, the move from podcasts toward streaming, daily produced segments over the 60-minute Q&A. The carrier and the cadence carry as much as the message.

Launches — concentrated delivery

The spike: turning a single moment into momentum.

- Announce the trajectory, not the number — “Phased Inevitability.” A static fact (a raise, a release) becomes momentum when you frame it as phase k of a planned sequence. Show the staircase, not the step. People back inevitability — so a launch that implies a larger, predetermined future pulls in talent, capital, and users a bare number never would.
- Timing is positioning. Attention shares one calendar. Never launch into a bigger story — you’ll be drowned; own a quiet window instead. (The inverse is a tool: bad news goes out under the cover of bigger noise.) And pre-compute dunk-risk — model how the announcement could be mocked before you ship it.
- Stack a coordination signal. Adoption stalls on “will this survive?” A visible wall of credible backers, announced together rather than dripped out one by one, is social proof at scale that kills the doubt. Production value telegraphs permanence.
- Make the concentrated moment land as an emotional arc. Concentration is what makes a launch memorable — but only when people feel it before they evaluate it. Stage the spike as a story (history → wonder → optimism), not a spec sheet: emotion is what gets a moment shared and remembered, where a feature list informs and fades.

Crisis — trust under stress

Delivery when something breaks. The stakes flip from growth to survival, and the rules invert.

“Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” — Mike Tyson

- Get ahead of the story; disclose first, fast, and fully. Everything comes out eventually — the only question is when, how, and by whom. Own the story or it owns you: he or she who discloses first, wins.
- It’s not the crime, it’s the cover-up. The concealment does more damage than the incident. Full disclosure in one move gives you the best chance of collapsing the drip-drip that keeps you in the cycle — when the whole story is genuinely out, there’s little left to report and attention moves on. It isn’t automatic: if facts are still shifting or counterparties are still leaking, even an honest-but-incomplete first disclosure can be overtaken — which is exactly why the disclosure has to be complete.

- Call it what it is. Euphemism erodes credibility — naming a hack an “incident” fools no one and signals you’re hiding. Plain, honest naming is what leaves “nothing more to report.”
- Don’t hide. Defensiveness reads as guilt: don’t disable replies, don’t bury it in corporate hedging. Lead with a human — usually the founder — connect plainly, and when you’re actually at fault, apologize. (Lawyers will resist; in a world where your audience can leave instantly, the empathy matters more than the legal hedge.)
- You get one shot. Full disclosure works once. You get a single chance to say sorry, and the behavior must not repeat — so communicate only what you know to be true, and run the response past a small, honest “brain trust” before you post.

(One nuance: when you’re attacked rather than at fault, you don’t grovel — you metabolize it.

Acknowledge, make a meme of it, and turn the haters into fuel.)

EXAMPLES

EXAMPLE

Distribution – own the pipe

The strongest distribution move isn't landing a great placement; it's owning the channel that shapes the conversation – a project running its own show and clip operation, or a company acquiring a media property to set the frame on demand rather than pitching to borrow someone else's. A rented placement fades in a day; an owned pipe compounds.

EXAMPLE

Launch – trajectory over number

The fundraising-announcement mistake is leading with the dollar figure. The fix is Phased Inevitability: frame the same raise as “Phase I of a multi-phase transition,” so a static number reads as momentum toward a predetermined future – and pair it with a coordination signal, a wall of credible backers announced together to kill the “will this survive?” question.

EXAMPLE

Crisis – Newsom vs. Clinton (and Nomad)

Two leaders, same situation, opposite outcomes. Bill Clinton denied the affair – the cover-up kept investigators digging and led to impeachment. Gavin Newsom, caught similarly, stepped to the podium and said “everything you've read is true, and I'm deeply sorry” – then stopped talking. There was little left to report; he was re-elected and went on to the governorship.

Read the lesson precisely: it is not “admit a scandal and you're fine.” It's that credibility is destroyed more by evasiveness than by a painful truth delivered cleanly – the clean disclosure didn't excuse the offense, it denied the cover-up its oxygen. The crypto version of the failure: the Nomad bridge hack, which the team kept calling an “incident” while the press reported a nine-figure exploit – euphemism that drained the last of its credibility. Call it what it is.

Common mistakes & misreadings

- 1** **Renting placements instead of owning pipes.** One-off PR hits with no standing asset; you start from zero every time.
- 2** **Announcing the number, not the trajectory.** A raise as a static fact instead of phase-k momentum.
- 3** **Launching into a bigger story (or skipping dunk-risk).** Drowned by a louder event, or mocked because no one modeled how it would land.
- 4** **Hiding in a crisis.** Disabling replies, euphemism, and the slow drip — the cover-up that does the real damage.
- 5** **Treating this as a trick-bag.** Running the tactics without the principle — a “coordination signal” of non-credible backers, or a “full disclosure” that’s actually partial. The mode is the point, not the trick.

APPLY IT — DO THIS NOW

- 1** **Audit your pipes.** What channel do you own (not rent)? Name the few people who actually move your market — are you cultivating them directly? Does your format match the medium’s current physics?
- 2** **Reframe your next announcement.** Is it a number or a trajectory? Rewrite it as “phase k of N,” map the calendar for a quiet window, and pre-compute its dunk-risk.
- 3** **Pre-stage a coordination signal.** Who’s the wall of credible backers you’d announce together to kill “will this survive?”
- 4** **Write your crisis posture now — before you need it.** One page: disclose first/fast/full, keep replies open, call it what it is, and name who’s on the brain trust. The time to decide is not mid-crisis.

RECAP

- Delivery has three tempos: distribution (sustained), launches (concentrated), crisis (under stress).
- Own the pipe, don't rent placements; go direct to the few who move your market.
- Sell the trajectory, not the number (Phased Inevitability); own the timing; stack a coordination signal; launch as an emotional arc.
- In crisis, disclose first/fast/full — the cover-up, not the crime, does the damage — and you get one shot.

RECALL – FIVE QUESTIONS

Q1 What are the three tempos of delivery, and how do they differ?

Q2 Why does owning a pipe beat renting a placement?

Q3 What is “Phased Inevitability,” and why does a trajectory beat a number?

Q4 In a crisis, why does the cover-up do more damage than the crime – and what does “one shot” mean?

Q5 Take a real crisis you’ve seen: did the brand disclose or hide, and what did it cost them?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

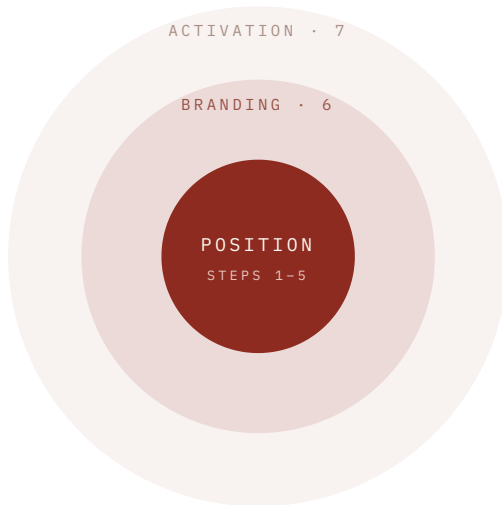
Apply the Method

14

The test harness: the whole method, run end-to-end on one real company

THE BUILD ORDER – EPICENTER OUT

FIG. 09 · CH 14



- 1-5 Positioning**
the epicenter — what you are
-
- 6 Branding**
the feeling earned on top
-
- 7 Activation**
narrative, attention, delivery

Figure 9. The build order: steps 1-5 are positioning (the epicenter); 6 is branding; 7 is activation; then you maintain.

“You’re marketing something much bigger than yourself.” – Ekram, on Celestia

WHAT THIS CHAPTER DOES

Every chapter before this taught a piece. This one runs them together on a real company — Celestia — from a vague, technical starting point to a sharp, legible position, then has you do the same on your own project.

The method, in sequence

The whole book in one column – one line each, no re-teaching:

1. Four Questions → a draft position (Ch 3)
2. The gate: Different? Relevant? Authentic? (Ch 3)
3. Posture: compete in a category, or create one (Ch 5)
4. Legibility: an ownable word, a named enemy, one diagram (Ch 6, 10)
5. Narrative: the future you're pulling forward (Ch 9)
6. Brand: the feeling, layered on after the position holds (Ch 7)
7. The artifact: statement + category + differentiation logic + narrative + tagline Watch it run.

The worked example: Celestia

Where it started – the problem

The project now called Celestia began life as “LazyLedger,” with genuinely novel tech: it split data availability apart from execution, so you didn't need one chain to do everything. Real innovation – and completely illegible. The team described it as “pluggable.”

That's the disease this whole book treats. “Pluggable” is what the tech does, told to engineers.

It's not a position. You can't rally a community around it, can't put it on a hoodie, can't throw a “Pluggable Summit.” The tech was strong; the framing was invisible.

Step 1 – The Four Questions (watch each one move)

The work is the transition from the left column to the right:

QUESTION	INSIDER / VAGUE ANSWER	SHARP ANSWER
What is it?	“a pluggable consensus + data-availability layer”	“the first modular blockchain network”
Why does it matter?	“you can plug in your own execution layer”	“launch your own chain without building the whole stack”
Why you, not a substitute?	“we’re more flexible”	“monolithic chains make you take the whole bundle; modular lets you pick your pieces”
Why now?	“scaling is hard”	“L1s are hitting their ceiling and fragmenting – the monolithic model is straining”

Notice the hinge: “pluggable” → “modular.” Same underlying tech, completely different fate.

Ekram chose “modular” deliberately, and not because it was the most precise engineering word. He chose it because it was a word you could build a brand around — teachable, conference-able, swag-able — and because it carried a fight (see Step 3). “Pluggable” had none of that.

Step 2 – The gate

- Different? Yes. “Modular” was a brand-new category word nobody owned.
- Relevant? Yes — builders genuinely felt the pain of monolithic chains (cost, rigidity). Relevance is why “modular” beat “pluggable”: same novelty, but only one connected to a pain people had.
- Authentic? This was the risky leg, and the method demands we be honest about it. By Ekram’s own admission, “modular” was a reframing of an older engineering debate, and at launch Celestia wasn’t cleanly “modular” yet — the position led the product. That’s allowed in this method (narrative can precede product), but it comes with a debt: reality has to catch up, fast, or the gap kills you. Celestia’s was rooted in real data-availability tech, and the team redeemed it. That’s the difference between a bold position and a lie.

Step 3 – Posture: create the category

Celestia took the Thiel path — create a new category — over the Jordan path of fighting in the crowded L1 race. Ekram is blunt that this is not the default: “I don’t recommend that for everyone... there’s a whole graveyard of projects that tried to create a category and failed,” usually because they couldn’t frame the problem or carry the education burden.

Creating a category needs one thing most teams forget: an enemy. “Modular is nothing without its constant compare-and-contrast with the monolithic status quo.” So the move

was to bucket every existing chain — Solana, Avalanche, Aptos, the incoming fast chains — as “monolithic,” and stand apart as “modular.” That tension is what made the story move.

Step 4 — Make it legible (and inclusive)

A category only exists once the market can repeat it. Three moves did that:

- A diagram. One graphic that made “break the stack apart” click for non-engineers — “oh, this makes sense.” Legibility before eloquence.
- A debate above the brand. Ekram’s rule: “if you’re good you get a conversation above the brand; if you’re excellent you build a debate.” So Celestia staged “Modular vs. Monolithic” panels — and welcomed the pushback (“no chain is truly monolithic”), because a live argument keeps a category alive far better than a monologue.
- Inclusiveness. A “category of one” is suspect, so Celestia celebrated others — invited projects to identify as modular, ran the Modular Summit, pointed its own account at the ecosystem rather than itself. You’re marketing something bigger than yourself.

This took roughly a year of saying the same thing. Most teams quit before the vocabulary lands. Discipline, not the idea, is the bottleneck.

Step 5 — Layer the brand on top

Only once the rational position held did the emotional brand grow around it: a “modular” movement, a tribe, and eventually the tagline “build whatever” — which didn’t come from an agency but surfaced organically at a team onsite and stuck because it matched the culture.

That’s branding done right: the response the position earned, not a coat of paint applied first.

The final artifact — what “done” looks like

CELESTIA — Positioning Artifact

Positioning statement (rational, reporter-safe): Celestia is the first modular blockchain network — it lets anyone launch their own blockchain without building the whole stack.

Category: Modular (the new world) vs. Monolithic (the status quo). Category created; enemy named.

Differentiation logic (Different × Relevant × Authentic): Different — a new category nobody owned. Relevant — builders feel the monolithic pain (cost, rigidity). Authentic — grounded in real data-availability tech (honest caveat: the position led the product; the team had to redeem it).

Narrative (one paragraph): Blockchains are moving from monolithic – where one

chain does everything and you take the whole bundle – to modular, where you pick your pieces. Celestia is the data-availability layer that makes the modular world possible. Without it, the multi-chain future gets pushed further away.

Tagline (emotional expression): “Build whatever.”

That’s the deliverable. Notice it’s one page, and every line traces back to a step. If you can’t fill this box for your project, you haven’t finished positioning – you’ve just been talking about it.

Why it worked: an ownable word + a named enemy + real relevance + relentless teaching + including others + a brand earned on top. And the honest part: the position outran the product, and that only worked because the team closed the gap instead of bluffing.

Run it on your own project

Same path, eight steps. Do it in one working session, then refine.

1. Name your “pluggable.” Write the feature-first, insider phrase you currently lead with. Be honest – that’s your starting illegibility.
2. Run the Four Questions (Ch 3), forcing each from vague to sharp: the plain noun, the so-what, the substitute (not just rivals), the why-now.
3. Find your “modular” – an ownable word. Test it: could you throw a summit around it? Get it on a hoodie? Could a podcaster teach it in 30 seconds? If not, keep searching.
4. Pick your posture (Ch 5). Competing? Find the ranking axis you win on. Creating? Name your “monolithic” – the enemy/status quo your category fights. No enemy, no tension, no category.
5. Run the gate. Different? Relevant? Authentic? If authenticity is weak because the position leads the product, that’s allowed – but write down how and by when you’ll redeem it.
6. Make it legible. One diagram, one repeated sentence, one debate you can host. Plan to say it for a year.
7. Layer the brand last. Only once the position holds, decide the feeling and the tagline – pointed at the same idea.
8. Fill the artifact box. Statement · category · differentiation logic · one-paragraph narrative
 - tagline. If a line won’t fill, go back a step.

Common failure modes

The predictable ways this goes wrong when you try it yourself:

1. Staying on “pluggable.” Leading with the feature/insider term and never translating it into a category a stranger gets.
2. A category with no enemy. Coining a word (“aggregated,” “elastic”) with nothing to fight — no tension, so nothing moves.
3. An unbuildable word. Picking a term you can’t teach, chant, or put on swag. If there’s no “Modular Summit” in it, it’s not a category word.
4. Category of one. Refusing to include rivals, so the market stays suspicious that it’s just you.
5. Quitting early. Category creation takes a year-plus of repetition; most teams switch the message before the vocabulary lands.
6. A position that outruns the product with no plan to redeem it. Narrative ahead of reality is a tool; narrative ahead of reality with no follow-through is a widening gap that kills you.
7. Branding first. Jumping to logo, palette, and tagline before the position holds — the exact inversion Chapter 2 warned against.

RECAP

- The method runs in order: Four Questions → the gate → posture → legibility → narrative → brand → artifact.
- Celestia’s whole turnaround sits on one hinge: “pluggable” → “modular” — a word you could build around, carrying a pain people felt and a fight worth having.
- A created category needs an enemy (“monolithic”), a diagram, a debate, and inclusiveness — taught on repeat for a year.
- The position led the product; that’s permitted only because the team redeemed it.
- “Done” is a one-page artifact: statement · category · differentiation logic · narrative · tagline.

Turn your “pluggable” into a “modular,” name its “monolithic,” teach it for a year — and don’t touch the logo until the box is full.

RECALL / APPLICATION – 5 QUESTIONS

Q1 Why did “modular” succeed where “pluggable” failed? Name at least three reasons.

Q2 What does a created category need besides a name – and what happens without it?

Q3 The Celestia position “led the product.” Why is that allowed in this method, and what’s the debt it creates?

Q4 Fill the artifact box for a project you know: statement, category, differentiation logic, one-paragraph narrative, tagline.

Q5 Look at your own (or a chosen) project: what is its “pluggable,” and what could its “modular” be?

EPILOGUE — E1

Building the Brand Team

*“It’s not what you say,
it’s who says it with you.”*

— EKRAM

The method in this book is too large for one person to run at scale. Position, brand, culture, narrative, frame, the founder symbol, attention, delivery — somewhere past the earliest stage, that becomes a team’s job. And here most companies make the same mistake: they staff marketing as a content-printing afterthought — junior, downstream, a service desk that turns finished decisions into posts.

If you’ve read this far, you know why that’s fatal. Marketing is the authorship of the company’s second existence. A function that load-bearing can’t be the last hire or the junior one. So the real question of this epilogue is: what does it take to staff the method?

Staff the attention war

Start with resourcing, because that’s where the mistake is largest. In attention-driven markets, the typical org-to-marketing ratio is far too lean — Ekram’s blunt version is that 50:1 is already too thin. If perception decides who gets capital, talent, and users, then under-staffing the perception function is under-resourcing survival. You would not run a frontier-tech company with one engineer per fifty employees. The attention war is no different, and most companies fight it badly out-manned.

The shape of the team

Organize the team around the method, not around channels:

- The position owner. Usually the founder, paired with a head of marketing who has real judgment — someone who owns what the company fundamentally is, and guards it against drift. This is the senior seat, not a coordinator role.

- Narrative and content — the air cover. A small group whose job is the few perceptionshifting pieces that move the frame, not an endless 1:1 grind. One thread that resets the comparison can outperform a hundred outreach calls; staff for that leverage, not for volume.
- The pipe. Someone senior owns the channel you control — increasingly, running the company’s X presence matters more than running press relations. Own the pipe; don’t rent placements through an agency.
- Taste and design — one owner. Vest taste in a single person. Design isn’t a democracy; a committee produces mush. One owner with a point of view produces a recognizable brand.
- The founder as symbol. Concentrate meaning in the founder (main character mode), but distribute the voice — let credible team members build real personal brands. A vocal, sharp court widens the field; a silent one dims the whole brand.

Hire for judgment, not output

The instinct is to hire for execution — someone who can ship the deliverables. The method needs the opposite: people with taste, a point of view, and strategic judgment, because the hard part was never making the content; it was knowing what to say and what to refuse.

This is what Ekram’s marketing-leader interview probes for. His questions are diagnostics for taste, not résumé checks — “Which project does the best marketing and branding in our industry? Which is most cringe?” and “What cognitive bias do you most exploit?” A candidate who can answer those well has the judgment the method runs on. One who can only describe campaigns they shipped does not.

How it fails

- Marketing kept downstream and junior — a service desk decorating decisions made elsewhere. The second existence goes unauthored by default.
- Renting the pipe. Outsourcing the owned channel to an agency that produces one-off placements, so you start from zero every time.
- Design by committee. No single taste-owner, so the brand averages out into mush.
- A muzzled team. Hoarding the voice in one person, or forbidding employees from building their own presence — fewer credible voices, less gravity.

Staff the function like the strategic layer it is. The companies that win the attention war are not the ones with the most content. They’re the ones who put senior judgment, real taste, and enough people on the problem to treat perception as what it is: survival.

EPILOGUE — E2

The AI Shift

“The rules for winning are being rewritten.”

— EKRAM

This is the most speculative part of the book, and it should be read that way — as a set of directional bets, not settled doctrine. The dynamics are still forming. But the method has a clear enough spine that we can say which parts AI threatens, which parts it leaves untouched, and which parts it quietly makes more valuable.

Start with the one change everything else follows from: AI drives the marginal cost of content to roughly zero. Anyone can now generate infinite copy, images, and video, competently, instantly. The feed floods. And the moment production becomes free, production stops being any kind of edge — it never really was, and now the illusion is gone.

When production is free, meaning is the scarcity

If everyone can make infinite content, the bottleneck moves up the stack — from making things to knowing what to say and what to stand for. The scarce inputs become position, taste, and judgment. This is why AI doesn't weaken the method; it sharpens it. When the cost of saying anything collapses, the value of having something to say goes up. Positioning decides what the world chooses next is more true in an AI world, not less.

What stays invariant — and appreciates

The load-bearing parts of the method are exactly the parts AI can't touch:

- **Position.** In a flooded feed, legibility is more decisive, not less. The company a stranger can place in one sentence wins the scarce attention; the rest drown in competent noise.
- **Brand as the moat.** You can't fork brand — and you can't generate it either. AI copies outputs; it cannot copy an earned response. The moat that can't be forked also can't be prompted.

- The founder as symbol. As content de-humanizes, a real human becomes the one source of trust a model can't synthesize. The human symbol appreciates precisely as everything around it becomes machine-made.
- Culture and belonging. Genuine human belonging gets scarcer, and therefore more valuable, in an AI-saturated world. The moat of "people like us" is one AI makes deeper, not shallower.

What shifts

- The bar for attention rises. Rizz has to work harder: the feed is now full of competent AI content, so competence is table stakes and only a real point of view or distinct taste stops the scroll. AI pulls everyone toward the mean — which makes a sharp, sacrificed position the way to stand out from machine-made sameness.
- Distribution gets new intermediaries. Discovery is increasingly AI-mediated. Being the default reference an AI cites when asked about your category becomes a positioning goal in its own right — a new surface on which the battle for the frame is fought.
- Sameness becomes the dominant failure. When everyone uses the same models, everyone regresses toward the same voice. The counter is everything this book is about: a position that hurts, a brand with one owned emotion, a narrative held for years. Differentiation by taste is the one thing that doesn't average out.

Where it nets out

AI raises the stakes on meaning. It commoditizes the production of everything except a real position, a real brand, a real human, and a real story — so the method doesn't get obsolete; it gets more important, and more crowded with people who skipped it. The specifics will keep moving — which intermediaries matter, how agents change discovery — but the direction won't.

EPILOGUE — E3

Where the Line Is

“He or she who discloses first, wins.”

— EKRAM

A book that teaches you to engineer perception owes you this chapter.

The method works by shaping what people believe — through mimetic desire, status arbitrage, frame control, and manufactured inevitability. Those are the tools of persuasion. They are also, used differently, the tools of manipulation. The founder chapter said it plainly: these levers are eminently manipulable, and where the line sits is its own discussion. This is that discussion.

The discomfort, named

You can use comparative perception to help a market understand a genuinely better option — or to anchor it against a strawman. You can use manufactured inevitability to rally people to a future you’re actually building — or to sell a future you have no intention of delivering. You can stand beside high-status peers because you belong there — or to borrow a credibility you haven’t earned. The same lever does honest work and dishonest work. Pretending otherwise would be the first dishonest move.

A working line

Here is a distinction worth holding: persuasion helps someone see something true more clearly, or choose in line with their own interest. Manipulation engineers a belief that is false, or against their interest, by exploiting how their mind works.

The method’s power tools all sit on that line, and the deciding question is always the same: is there a real thing underneath? A frame that makes a genuinely better option legible is persuasion. The identical frame wrapped around nothing is manipulation. The lever doesn’t tell you which one you’re doing. The reality underneath does.

The method already has an ethic

What’s striking, reading the chapters back, is that the method is not ethically silent — it keeps installing the same guardrail without naming it:

- Narrative may lead reality, but reality must redeem it (Ch 9). A story that runs ahead of the product with no plan to catch up is, in the book's own word, fraud. The pure con is already ruled out.
- “Early, not evil” (Ch 10) is not just the kinder move; it's the stronger one. Honoring an incumbent beats lying about them.
- Full, honest disclosure wins under stress (Ch 13). When it matters most, the method's advice is to tell the whole truth first.
- You cannot fake deification (Ch 11). Hollow levers — status with no substance, devotion with no conviction — eventually feel empty, and the market senses the void.

Read together, these say one thing: the perception has to point at something real. That isn't a moral bolt-on. It's load-bearing in the method itself.

Why honesty is also the better strategy

The strongest argument against manipulation here is not only that it's wrong — it's that it's bad positioning. Reputation compounds over years, and manipulation gets repriced violently the moment it's exposed; the crisis chapter is, in part, a chapter about the bill coming due. A manufactured perception can outrun the truth for a while. It cannot outrun it forever, because the second existence is eventually checked against the first.

Manipulation, in other words, doesn't survive the long game the rest of this book is trying to win.

The line

Where exactly each person draws it is theirs to decide, and reasonable people will place it in slightly different spots. But the book's stance is clear enough to state in one sentence: use these levers to make something true legible, desirable, and inevitable — never to manufacture belief in something that isn't there.

The most durable version of this method is the honest one. Not because honesty is pleasant, but because the story always, eventually, has to be redeemed by the reality. You can author a second existence. You cannot indefinitely escape the first.

REFERENCE

Appendices

Run the method: the glossary, worksheets, and the catalogs the chapters draw on.

-
- A Glossary of Coinages

 - B Worksheets – Run the Method

 - C The Emotion Menu (the seven)

 - D The Archetype Catalog (the twelve)

 - E The Brand-Craft Toolkit

 - F The Language Toolkit

 - G The Perception Engine

APPENDIX A

Glossary of Coinages

The method's working vocabulary. These are the terms you won't find defined elsewhere — Ekram's coinages and sharpenings. Inherited terms are marked with their origin; everything unmarked is his.

TERM	ONE-LINE DEFINITION	WHERE
Air cover	Marketing as the function that softens the whole battlefield so the ground game (sales, BD) wins one-on-one.	Ch 12
Belonging-as-moat	In an infinite-content world, belonging is the defensible asset competitors can't fork.	Ch 8
Bundle-and-breakaway	Borrow attention by attaching to a high-attention entity, convert it to owned value, then exit to your own narrative.	Ch 12
Coordination signal	A wall of credible backers announced together to kill the "will this survive?" doubt.	Ch 13
Default reference	Becoming the name the market reaches for first in your category.	Ch 13
Dunk-risk	How mockable an announcement is — pre-compute it before you ship.	Ch 13
Early, not evil	Make the incumbent the respected past rather than the villain; honor beats attack.	Ch 10
Future-delta test	"If you vanished tomorrow, what future would recede?" The test of a real narrative.	Ch 9
Law of Sacrifice (Ries & Trout)	A position must hurt — what you refuse is what defines you.	Ch 4
Main character mode	The marketing analogue of founder mode: the founder runs point as a character, not a spokesperson.	Ch 11
Mechanics / missionaries / mothers (Cunningham)	The three modes of differentiation — by product, by concept, by user.	Ch 5
Meme the gigabrain	Compress a high-credibility, complex idea into a shareable form without losing the insight.	Ch 12
Narrative-market-fit	Narrative traction that can arrive before product-market-fit in frontier markets.	Ch 9
Narrative singularity	Team, users, press, even competitors all repeating your one story.	Ch 9
Phased Inevitability	Frame a moment as phase-k of a predetermined sequence; sell the trajectory, not the number.	Ch 13

TERM	ONE-LINE DEFINITION	WHERE
Position or be positioned	If you don't author your position, the market assigns you one anyway.	Ch 2
Risk signature (credited to Thiel)	The market discounts your words and prices the visible, costly risks you take in public.	Ch 11
Rizz	Intrinsic pull – content charged enough to stop the scroll.	Ch 12
The second existence	Every company exists twice: once as reality, once as the story the market acts on.	Ch 1
You can't fork brand	The product forks; the earned response doesn't – brand is the uncopyable moat.	Ch 6

APPENDIX B

Worksheets (run the method)

The same prompts from every chapter's Apply it, gathered here as fill-in templates so you can run the whole method in one sitting. Use them with a real company in front of you.

- 01** The Four Questions (Ch 3). What is it? · Why does it matter? · Why you, and not a substitute?

APPENDIX C

The Emotion Menu (the seven)

Brand runs on one owned emotion (Ch 7). The seven are Sally Hogshead’s fascination triggers, as Ekram deploys them – here is the full menu. Pick one – maybe two – go full-throttle, and ignore the rest. The test is always: does the feeling dramatize the position?

EMOTION	WHAT IT MAKES PEOPLE FEEL	REACH FOR IT WHEN...	EXAMPLE REGISTER
Power	Dominance, capability, force	Your position is strength or scale	<i>Raw-performance infrastructure</i>
Lust	Desire, allure, wanting	The position is aspirational or consumer-facing	<i>Sleek consumer apps, blue-chip NFTs</i>
Mystique	Intrigue, scarcity, the unknown	Exclusivity or selectivity is the edge	<i>Stealth funds, invite-only protocols</i>
Alarm	Urgency, threat	You’re mobilizing against a danger	<i>Security, privacy, “the old way is breaking”</i>
Prestige	Status, refinement, arrival	Premium credibility is the play	<i>Institutional products, top-tier funds</i>
Rebellion	Defiance, outsider energy	You’re the challenger to an establishment	<i>Bitcoin’s autonomy, anti-bank DeFi</i>
Trust	Safety, reliability, reassurance	You hold something people can’t afford to lose	<i>Custodians, stablecoins, audited infra</i>

Rule of thumb. If you can’t answer “is your brand flight or fight?”, you haven’t chosen yet.

APPENDIX D

The Archetype Catalog (the twelve)

The twelve archetypes are Carl Jung's; the crypto/tech assignments below are illustrative, to show the role in action. Pick one dominant (a secondary is fine). An archetype is a strategic role, not a look.

ARCHETYPE	THE ROLE	GOOD FOR	ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE
Innocent	Optimism, simplicity, goodness	Ease, approachability	<i>A friendly consumer wallet</i>
Everyman	Belonging, relatability	Mass adoption	<i>An approachable on-ramp/exchange</i>
Hero	Mastery, courage, winning	Performance, challenge	<i>Solana (“build,” “eat glass”); Nike</i>
Outlaw	Rebellion, breaking the rules	Challengers	<i>Bitcoin; Cosmos</i>
Explorer	Freedom, frontier, discovery	New categories	<i>A protocol opening new design space</i>
Creator	Imagination, building	Platforms and tools	<i>Ethereum (“world computer”)</i>
Ruler	Control, order, authority	Incumbents, standards	<i>A dominant exchange or standard</i>
Magician	Transformation, vision	Breakthroughs	<i>A ZK project (“magic” proofs)</i>
Lover	Intimacy, beauty, passion	Design-led, consumer	<i>A design-forward consumer app</i>
Caregiver	Service, protection	Security, custody, infra	<i>An audit firm or custodian</i>
Jester	Fun, irreverence, play	Attention, community	<i>Dogecoin; Duolingo</i>
Sage	Truth, knowledge, proof	Research, credibility	<i>A research-led protocol; Anthropic</i>

APPENDIX E

The Brand Craft Toolkit

Fast tests for any brand asset (Ch 7). They check one thing: is the pattern, not the logo, doing the work?

- The napkin test. Can a stranger redraw your mark from memory? If not, it isn't yet a signature.
- The logo-crop test. Crop out the logo and name. Is the brand still recognizable from the gradient, motif, or shape alone? A real visual signature survives the crop.
- The tattoo / swag test. Would a genuine fan wear it? Desire, not just recognition.
- The say-vs-perform check. Are you stating the emotion ("we're bold") or performing it through what you do? Stating is weak and distrusted; performing is undeniable because it costs something.
- The three-axis score. Rate any asset on authenticity × differentiation × extendability. A weak score on any axis is a redesign signal.
- The one rule. Design isn't a democracy. Vest taste in a single owner; a committee produces mush.

APPENDIX F

The Language Toolkit

How to write the content that travels (Ch 9, Ch 12). Get the story right first — these are transmission, not construction.

- The one-thing rule. Say one thing a hundred ways, not a hundred things once. Repetition, spaced over time, is the craft.
- The vivid behavioral image. Find the single concrete, true, repeatable image that dramatizes your narrative (the founder on the factory floor). One image beats a deck.
- The extreme (true) comparison. One well-chosen comparison that forces the listener to drop the old reference point and re-anchor on you.
- Meme the gigabrain. Compress a high-credibility, complex idea into an approachable, shareable form without losing the insight — people share it because it makes them look smart. Meme mindfully; cringe cheapens the idea.
- The air-cover artifact. The one perception-shifting thread or essay that pre-softens every later conversation. Shape: hook → reframe the problem → install the new comparison → the conclusion that now feels inevitable.
- Target the audience's audience. Write for the people who influence your buyer, not only the buyer.
- Don't over-explain. Say the one thing, then stop. Over-explaining hands the narrative back.
- The captivation filter. Before publishing: does it stop your own scroll? If not, it won't stop anyone's.

APPENDIX G

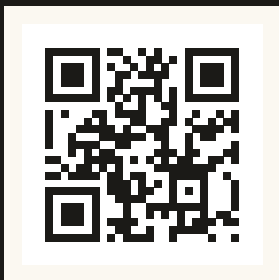
The Perception Engine

The levers underneath the founder-symbol and attention chapters (Ch 11). Powerful, and eminently manipulable – which is exactly why the line on using them is its own discussion (Epilogue E3). The rule that governs all of them: the perception must point at something real.

- Mimetic desire (Girard). People want what desirable people want. Show the right person doing the thing, and the wanting spreads on its own.
- Comparative perception (anchoring). The brain decides what you are by what you're set against. Choose the anchor deliberately (“the Stripe of X”) rather than letting the market pick a worse one.
- Status arbitrage / triangulation. Stand beside higher-status peers and the market files you at their level – you inherit status before you've earned it.
- Risk signature (credited to Thiel). People discount your words and price the visible, costly risks you take in public. Public risk is the conviction signal words can't fake.
- Frame control (see Ch 10). The deepest lever: whoever sets the comparison the market judges by has won before the features are examined.
- Social proof / coordination (see Ch 13). Visible, credible backing – announced together – collapses the “will this survive?” doubt.

The caveat, restated. Each of these works equally well over a real thing and over nothing. Used over a real thing, it's persuasion. Used over nothing, it's manipulation – and, per E3, also bad positioning, because the second existence is eventually checked against the first.

Position, or be positioned.



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