

# POOL & SPA MARKETING



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Homeowners are reimagining their backyards as full outdoor living spaces, not just a place for a pool, shifting the focus toward environments that support everything from quiet downtime to full-scale entertaining.

PHOTO COURTESY BACKYARD DREAMS POOL DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION LTD.

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# The Season, in Real Time

**By June, the season is no longer forecast; it is being experienced.**

Crews are fully booked, service departments are operating at peak capacity, and customer expectations are being reflected in real time. Across the Canadian pool and spa industry, conversations are becoming more specific: how to improve efficiency, simplify maintenance, support wellness-focused lifestyles, and deliver spaces that feel more integrated into everyday life. That evolution is evident throughout this issue.

In *Designing for Real Life: What Homeowners are Actually Asking For* in 2026 (page 8), the modern backyard is framed less as a showpiece and more as a functional extension of the home. Crystal Lengua writes that “homeowners are reimagining their backyards as full outdoor living spaces, not just a place for a pool,” highlighting a shift in priorities toward usability, wellness, and low-maintenance living. Builders are seeing growing demand for social pool layouts, integrated outdoor zones, automation, and designs that support how families use their space day to day.

That same focus on practical performance extends to service operations. In *Cordless, Lightweight, and Always Ready: Why Battery-powered Pool Vacuums Are a Must for Today's Service Pros* (page 24), these tools are presented as a meaningful operational advantage rather than a novelty. As veteran technician Karen Whitton explains, “I couldn't get through my day without a battery-operated pool cleaner.” In a market where labour efficiency and route optimization continue to matter, even small time savings can increase service capacity and enhance customer interaction.

Technology is also reshaping the dealership side of the industry. In *The Intelligent Dealership* (page 30), Dennis Gray explores how artificial intelligence (AI) is moving beyond automation toward what he calls augmented human intelligence (AHI). “The human remains responsible for the interaction; the system supports the outcome,” Gray writes. As more businesses experiment with AI-driven workflows, the distinction between replacing expertise and supporting it is increasingly important.

Operational discipline and technical knowledge remain equally critical in the hot tub segment. In *The Science of Hot Tub Maintenance* (page 18), Dr. Roy Vore reminds readers that “the primary focus of every operator and owner must be on safe use.” As wellness continues to drive hot tub adoption, expectations for water quality, sanitization, and preventive maintenance are rising in tandem with demand.

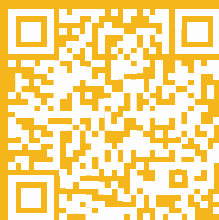
Taken together, these stories reflect an industry becoming more intentional in how it designs, delivers, and supports the customer experience.

The season is underway. The challenge now is not simply keeping up but continuing to adapt in ways that deliver long-term value. 

Jason Cramp  
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

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# Designing for Real Life

What Homeowners are Actually Asking for in 2026



By Crystal Lengua

Opposite page:

**Top:** Homeowners are increasingly investing in backyard spaces that function as everyday extensions of their homes.

PHOTO COURTESY RIVER ROCK POOLS

**Bottom left:** Homeowners are reimagining their backyards as full outdoor living spaces.

PHOTO COURTESY BACKYARD DREAMS POOL DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION LTD.

**Bottom right:** Features like pebble and glass-bead pool finishes provide texture and slip resistance.

AI-GENERATED PHOTO

**Backyard design in the pool and spa industry** has long been tied to scale and visual impact. Large pools, deep ends, and dramatic water features were often seen as the defining elements of a successful build, with how a space looked taking priority over how it was used. In 2026, that approach no longer carries the same weight.

### A shift toward lifestyle and functionality

A more grounded, lifestyle-driven approach to outdoor design is taking hold. To better understand how this trend is unfolding across the country, insights were gathered from three industry-leading pool builders from Western, Central, and Eastern Canada.

Homeowners are asking more practical questions from the very beginning. They want to understand how a space will function on a Tuesday evening, not just how it will look on a Saturday afternoon with guests. This shift toward real usability is reshaping backyard design across Canada and mirrors broader changes in residential living. People are starting to see their backyard the same way they see any other

room in their home: as a space that needs to function, flow, and fit their day-to-day routines. They are now looking to pool and spa professionals not simply to execute a plan, but to bring vision, show what is possible, and help set the tone for the entire project from the outset.

Research from organizations like the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB)<sup>1</sup> continues to show that outdoor living spaces remain among the most desired home features. Still, the motivation behind that demand has changed. Homeowners are no longer investing in their backyards to boost property value or curb appeal. They are investing in spaces that extend their living environment and support daily life in a more meaningful way.

That reality is being reinforced on the ground. Jessica Russell, owner of Backyard Dreams Pool Design and Construction serving Halifax and surrounding areas in Nova Scotia, notes that the starting point for most projects has fundamentally changed. "Homeowners are reimagining their backyards as full outdoor living spaces, not just a

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Today's backyard pools are designed around entertaining and lounging, with integrated seating and social features reflecting how homeowners actually use their spaces.

PHOTO COURTESY  
BACKYARD DREAMS  
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place for a pool,” she says, explaining clients are increasingly focused on building environments supporting everything from quiet downtime to full-scale entertaining.

A clear reflection of this change is happening inside the pool itself. For decades, larger and deeper pools were widely perceived as the premium option, driven by a mix of tradition and assumption. Deep ends and diving boards were considered standard, even when they were rarely used. Today, that thinking is being challenged by a more realistic understanding of how people interact with their space.

“There’s also been a noticeable decline in requests for deep ends of 2.44 m (8 ft). Instead, clients are leaning toward more social, functional depths—typically in the 1.22 to 1.52 m (4 to 5 ft) range, like what you’d see in southern climates,” Russell adds. “This allows for standing, conversation, and relaxed enjoyment of the water, making the pool more usable for longer periods throughout the day.”

### Designing backyards for everyday living

Across the industry, there is a noticeable shift toward shallower, more functional pool designs that prioritize usability over volume and account for the smaller lots being sold with new homes. Tanning ledges have become a staple in modern designs, not just as a visual upgrade, but because they naturally support how space is used. Whether it is a place for kids to play, a spot to lounge partially submerged, or an area to gather without fully committing to a swim, tanning ledges add flexibility, aligning with how these environments are being lived in.

Andrew Kondi, president of Rocky Mountain Pools and Spas in Calgary, Alta., has seen this consistently in Western Canada. He notes that clients are increasingly choosing layouts where “most or all of the pool is usable space,” with deep ends and diving boards becoming less relevant to how people spend their time in the water.

This same progression becomes even more apparent during the design process. Mike Priest, president of River Rock Pools serving

the Windsor-Essex area in Ontario, says once clients are introduced to features such as tanning ledges and integrated seating, their priorities begin to shift.

“Homeowners are increasingly looking for fully custom pools designed around entertaining and lounging,” he says, highlighting the growing importance of features supporting interaction and comfort rather than sheer scale. “Pool size tends to reflect the client’s lifestyle: smaller, more intimate pools suit homeowners who are looking for a personal sanctuary, while larger families with kids and grandkids tend to prioritize bigger pools built for fun activities and weekend gatherings.”

The result is a more intentional approach to pool design, one aligning with real behaviour rather than legacy expectations.

The same shift toward intention is showing up in the finishes homeowners are choosing. Research shows that the traditional light-blue plaster pool is giving way to deeper, moodier interiors in graphite, charcoal, deep teal, emerald, and even black. Beyond the dramatic look, darker finishes tend to reduce surface glare, hide minor imperfections, and absorb more solar heat, all of which make the pool feel more like a natural body of water than a manufactured feature. While these darker pool finishes are gaining popularity for their dramatic, natural esthetic, safety experts note that these finishes can reduce underwater visibility. Organizations like the Lifesaving Society and Red Cross emphasize that clear visibility is a critical factor in drowning prevention, as it allows for quicker recognition of a person in distress beneath the water’s surface.

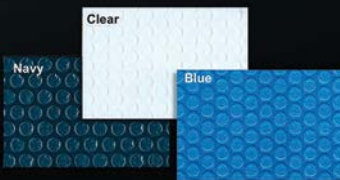
Darker interiors absorb more light, reducing contrast between the pool floor and a swimmer’s body, particularly in low-light conditions or shaded environments. This can make it more difficult to detect someone underwater, especially children or individuals wearing darker swimwear.

As a result, while the design trend continues to grow, homeowners and designers must pair darker finishes with enhanced safety measures. These can include adequate



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Today's outdoor living spaces seamlessly blend pools, lounge areas, and greenery, making the backyard a cohesive environment from morning through evening.

PHOTO COURTESY RIVER ROCK POOLS

Busy homeowners are opting for materials, technology, and features—such as automatic covers and advanced filtration—that minimize ongoing maintenance for maximum enjoyment.

PHOTO COURTESY COVER STAR CANADA

underwater lighting, consistent supervision, high-contrast safety markings (such as on steps and ledges), and adherence to best practices outlined by water safety authorities.

Pebble and glass-bead finishes are also gaining popularity for the texture and slip resistance they add. Around the pool, large-format porcelain tile and textured natural stones such as travertine, sandstone, and limestone are becoming the go-to for decking. This is because they stay cooler underfoot, resist slipping, and age gracefully in Canadian freeze-thaw conditions.

This direction is echoing across the wider design world. Pantone's 2026 Colour of the Year is Cloud Dancer, a warm-leaning white described as a "calming influence in a frenetic society," and Benjamin Moore's is Silhouette, a soft burnt umber from a palette the brand is calling "refined elegance." Across the board, the major colour forecasts for 2026 are leaning toward calm, grounded, and nature-adjacent, the same terms homeowners use to describe what they want from their backyards.

### Beyond the pool: Lighting, zones, and maintenance

The role of the backyard is also expanding well beyond the pool itself. Rather than serving as a single focal point, the space is now designed as a layered environment made up of distinct zones, each supporting a different function. These can range from outdoor kitchens and dining areas to lounge spaces, fire feature seating, and quieter corners dedicated to relaxation or wellness. The result is a backyard that flows naturally from morning routines through to evening use, making it cohesive while still serving multiple purposes.

Lighting is becoming one of the quiet workhorses behind this layered approach. Outdoor lighting is moving decisively toward warm-temperature LEDs in the 2700 to 3000K range, away from the cooler, harsher light that once dominated landscape design. Fixtures themselves are disappearing into the architecture.

LED strips are integrated into steps, under coping, beneath bench seating, and along retaining walls, so the glow is seen rather than the hardware. The most well-designed backyards now use layered lighting. Path lights for movement, accent lights for trees or sculptural elements, wash lights for broader surfaces, and task lighting for outdoor kitchens and dining areas are all tied together through a single smart control system. There is also a noticeable shift toward DarkSky-friendly design, with shielded, downward-facing fixtures that preserve the natural night while still creating an inviting atmosphere. The result is a space that feels as important after sunset as it does during the day.

This mirrors what has been happening in interior design for years, where open layouts are balanced with clearly defined areas for specific activities. Canadian landscape design principles also support the direction. The Canadian Society of Landscape Architects (CSLA) emphasizes the role of design in creating outdoor environments that are both sustainable and functional, reinforcing the importance of spaces that go beyond esthetics to support real, everyday use.

That same mindset is showing up clearly at the homeowner level, not just through designers and architects.

As Kondi explains, "With the general shift from pools and spas being luxury and entertainment items, to being products that promote physical and mental health and wellness, clients are wanting to use their outdoor spaces as often as they can and for as long as they can."

This is more evident as homeowners think beyond the pool and consider how the entire space supports their daily routines. When clients are walked through how they might use the space throughout the day for morning coffee, family time, or evening relaxation, the design naturally evolves to accommodate those moments. What begins as a pool project quickly expands into something more intentional.



Shallow, more versatile pool designs now prioritize everyday usability over volume, reflecting a more intentional approach that fits smaller lots and modern lifestyles.

PHOTO COURTESY BACKYARD DREAMS POOL DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION LTD.

### Wellness is driving design

Another major influence shaping outdoor design is the ever-growing emphasis on wellness. Pools and spas have long been associated with relaxation, but they are increasingly being positioned as tools for physical health and mental well-being. Research from the Global Wellness Institute (GWI) highlights just

how quickly this sector is growing: wellness real estate reached \$548 billion globally in 2024, making it one of the fastest-growing segments of the wellness economy. That direction is becoming more visible in the pool and spa industry.

Features that support movement, recovery, and everyday use are becoming more central to the design conversation. Swim spas, swim jets, and hydrotherapy features are more common, particularly among homeowners who prioritize fitness as part of their daily routine.

“The biggest design trend we’ve seen over the past year is the growing focus on the fitness and exercise benefits of pools. We’ve installed more fibreglass lap pools than ever before, as more clients are specifically requesting pools designed for swimming laps or equipped with swim jet systems to enhance their workout experience. This shift represents a significant change from what we’ve seen in the past, highlighting how backyards are evolving to meet more health-focused needs,” Russell says.

Design is also trending toward more natural, retreat-like environments that promote calm, comfort, and restoration. Priest is seeing this reflected in how clients approach the overall feel of their backyard. “I’ve noticed a move toward natural, retreat-style backyards. Think cottage-inspired esthetics with lush landscaping and spaces designed to help people relax and recharge,” he says.

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Ease of maintenance is a key consideration for homeowners, who now seek features and materials that support long-term enjoyment with minimal effort.

PHOTO COURTESY RIVER ROCK POOLS



Builders are embracing biophilic design principles by incorporating natural materials and landscaping, resulting in retreat-like backyards that promote calm and well-being.

AI-GENERATED IMAGE

This aligns closely with the principles of biophilic design, an approach rooted in the idea that humans have an inherent connection to nature. The concept builds on the “biophilia hypothesis” proposed by Edward O. Wilson, a Harvard biologist and leading authority on biodiversity, who argued that humans have an innate affinity for the natural world. It means that affinity for nature is not a preference but a biological need. In practice, this means incorporating natural materials, organic shapes, water elements, and layered landscaping to create environments that feel immersive rather than constructed. It is not simply about adding greenery; it is about designing spaces that reduce stress, support well-being, and feel intuitively comfortable to spend time in.

Alongside these lifestyle considerations, a practical expectation is shaping decisions across every market segment. Homeowners want spaces that are easy to maintain. Busy schedules, time constraints, and a desire for simplicity are driving a shift toward materials and systems that reduce ongoing maintenance. In response, the industry is seeing increased adoption of automatic covers, advanced filtration systems, durable hardscaping materials such as stone, tile, and composite surfaces, and the use of wildflowers in place of traditionally higher-maintenance plantings. Landscaping is evolving alongside simplified planting schemes requiring minimal care. Artificial intelligence (AI)-powered robotic pool cleaners now use intelligent mapping to optimize cleaning paths, while automated chemical monitoring systems balance water chemistry in real time with minimal intervention. Smart irrigation, robotic lawn care, and integrated control systems extend this low-maintenance approach beyond the pool itself, enabling automation to rapidly transform the entire backyard environment.

### The result is a clear shift in expectation

Homeowners are no longer asking how to maintain their space—they are asking how little they need to think about it.

Kondi emphasizes that ease of maintenance is becoming a key factor in how homeowners approach the design process. Rather than focusing solely on how a space looks, clients are thinking more holistically about how it will function over time and what it will require from them day to day.

“They are designing them, not just intentionally for lifestyle and esthetics, but also for ease of maintenance. They want to be able to enjoy and use without constant upkeep,” Kondi says.

Seasonality is also being reconsidered, particularly in Canadian markets where outdoor use traditionally has a shorter window. Design strategies are now being developed to support three-season or extended use, with built-in heating systems, covered structures, wind protection, and lighting.

“People are truly planning on their outdoor spaces to be at least three-season spaces, and plan to accommodate this,” Kondi explains. He notes that homeowners want to use their backyards “if not year-round, then at least well into the shoulder seasons. We are seeing clients adding snow melt zones around pools and spas for easier and more comfortable winter use.”

Homeowners frequently begin the process with assumptions shaped by past experiences or inspiration gathered online. As the design process unfolds, those ideas are refined through practical considerations and a deeper understanding of how the space will be used.

Today’s homeowner is also arriving more informed than ever, shaped by constant exposure to design platforms, social media,

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and emerging AI tools. They often come in with highly curated ideas. Builders who can take that inspiration and translate it into something that works within real-world constraints will have a clear advantage.

With such easy (and often overwhelming) access to images and ideas online (e.g. Pinterest, TikTok, Instagram), clients often come in with ideas that they have seen on these platforms. “Often, however, the images are from climates very different from ours, making their top choices either not recommended or sometimes even impossible,” says Kondi. “For example, covers aren’t typically ‘pretty,’ and are seldom shown in beautiful pool photos, yet are important (if not necessary) for our clients based on climate, safety, or bylaws. Clients will often choose a pool shape that cannot easily accommodate an auto-cover, and once they are informed of this, they choose a rectangular pool.”

Priest describes a comparable evolution in how projects take shape. “Most clients come in wanting something familiar. A simple pool with a standard concrete patio, similar to what they’ve had before,” he says. “But once they see what’s possible, their vision quickly evolves. The result almost always exceeds their original expectations.”

This highlights the growing importance of guidance and expertise within the industry. The role of the builder or designer now extends beyond execution to helping homeowners shape a vision that is both achievable and aligned with how they live. Leaders who build feedback loops within their organizations, gathering insight from service teams and past customers, can refine future designs and identify opportunities for both new projects and meaningful upgrades for existing clientele.

One of the most significant opportunities for professionals lies in translating inspiration into reality. Tools such as 3D landscape design software are increasingly being used to bridge gaps,

allowing professionals to quickly visualize concepts, test layouts, and communicate ideas in a way clients can clearly understand. At the same time, expanding connections with landscapers, manufacturers, suppliers, and builders is becoming a key competitive advantage. Those who build strong industry relationships will be better positioned to deliver fully integrated projects, offering clients a seamless experience from concept through completion. In a market where expectations continue to rise, collaboration is no longer optional; it is what sets leading professionals apart.

Across the industry, a clear pattern is emerging as homeowner expectations continue to evolve. Russell captures this shift succinctly: “The backyard is becoming a complete lifestyle space, not just a standalone feature.”

In that sense, designing for real life is no longer a niche concept. It is becoming the standard. 🦋

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more, see National Association of Home Builders. Research on trends in outdoor living spaces and homeowner preferences. Available at [nahb.org](http://nahb.org)

<sup>2</sup> Refer to the Global Wellness Institute. Wellness real estate report and global wellness economy data. Available at [globalwellnessinstitute.org/industry-research/2025-build-well-to-live-well-wellness-real-estate-communities](http://globalwellnessinstitute.org/industry-research/2025-build-well-to-live-well-wellness-real-estate-communities)

<sup>3</sup> Additional context is provided by the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects (CSLA), a national body promoting sustainable and functional landscape design in Canada. Available at [csla-aapc.ca](http://csla-aapc.ca)

<sup>4</sup> Background information can be found in Edward O. Wilson's biophilia hypothesis. Available at [britannica.com/science/biophilia-hypothesis](http://britannica.com/science/biophilia-hypothesis)

<sup>5</sup> Trend insights are outlined by Pantone Color Institute. Colour of the Year 2026, Cloud Dancer. Available at [pantone.com/color-of-the-year/2026](http://pantone.com/color-of-the-year/2026)



**Crystal Lengua** is the vice president of Canadian operations at Cover Valet, bringing 25 years of experience in the pool and spa industry. Widely recognized as a “Power Woman” in her field, she is known for her leadership and many career achievements.

Outside the office, Lengua shares her expertise through seminars, trade show presentations, and contributions to publications such as *Pool & Spa Marketing*. A York University graduate and advocate for female empowerment, her education includes marketing management, public relations, and corporate communications, along with professional experience in sales, social media marketing, and event management. She also holds a certification in mindfulness meditation from the University of Toronto.



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# The Science of Hot Tub Maintenance

By Roy Vore, Ph.D.  
CPO I, CPO, AVPHI  
AI-GENERATED IMAGES

## How the Right Approach Ensures Safe, Enjoyable Hot Tub Use

**Hot tubs are unfairly lumped in with pools, as if** they are just smaller, warmer cousins—they are not. They are an entirely different species requiring a softer, more patient approach to management. In heavily used hot tubs, the bather load per gallon of water can be up to 100 times greater than in a typical pool. More bathers in less water mean more organic contaminants, driving up chlorine demand, increasing combined chlorine (disinfection byproducts [DBPs]), and leading to odours, complaints, and potential illness. With a bit of time, a heavily used hot tub can quickly become cloudy and develop a foul smell—sometimes bluntly referred to as “people soup.” This is certainly not the kind of impression a facility wants to give.

As with all aquatic venues, sanitization and water balance are separate issues. Sanitization is focused solely on preventing illness. Water balance focuses on preserving equipment’s useful life by preventing

scaling and corrosion. The vast majority of aquatic literature focuses on water balance, with little or no mention of preventing illness—this needs to change. A hot tub can look beautiful and still be crawling with *Pseudomonas* or *Legionella* if sanitization is not maintained. This is a deep dive into what really keeps people safe.

### Recreational water illnesses

The primary focus of every operator and owner must be on safe use. Recreational water illnesses (RWIs) in hot tubs are different from those in pools. There are two primary differences:

1. Users behave differently in pools and hot tubs. In pools, people swim, so their heads are at the waterline, and accidental ingestion is common. However, documented cases show variation in the amount of ingested water by age and between competitive and leisure swimming.<sup>1</sup>

Gastrointestinal illness in pools is most commonly caused by swallowing water contaminated by fecal matter. In pools with insufficient sanitizer concentration, fecal matter released into the water disperses and is ingested, leading to illness. However, in hot tubs, users are mostly stationary and do not actively move in the water. There is no documented case of gastrointestinal illness associated with hot tubs.


Considering the design of hot tubs, this is an enlightening observation. Hot tub jets produce directional flow rates that can be considered as low-pressure power washers. The concentrated flow can displace fecal residues from bathers, increasing the need for effective water treatment. Since the bather load is higher in hot tubs, the expectation is that the gastrointestinal illness rate should be higher, but it is not; it is zero. The difference lies in user behaviour. Since hot tub users are soaking and not swimming, they are ingesting very little, if any, water. Therefore, they do not become ill from fecal germs.



2. Differences in water temperature and venue design are a key distinction among RWI types. *Legionella pneumophila*, the bacteria that cause Pontiac fever and the quite serious Legionnaires' disease, thrives in hot water and is limited by the cooler temperatures of pools. *Legionella* bacteria cause pneumonia, and these bacteria are inhaled rather than swallowed. The air injection system of hot tubs produces airborne droplets, a few of which are less than 10 microns in diameter and can be carried into the deeper sections of the lungs.

If the sanitizer concentration is insufficient, those droplets become a delivery system for


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Differences in water temperature and venue design are a key distinction among recreational water illness types.

*Legionella* bacteria. Once in the lung, the bacteria can invade the macrophage white blood cells, leading to Legionnaires' disease. If not treated appropriately and promptly, the fatality rate can be 40 per cent. The *Legionella* illness rate in traditional pools is zero. The lack of aerosol-generating water features, coupled with the growth-inhibiting lower water temperatures in pools, is an effective control measure that prevents outbreaks of Legionellosis.

### Free chlorine concentration

The absolute minimum free chlorine concentration in hot tubs is 1.0 parts per million (ppm); however, most registered products and public facilities require 2.0 ppm. For pools, a minimum of 1.0 ppm free chlorine is supported by valid field studies.<sup>2,3,4</sup> The data on hot tubs is less robust.

One study found high concentrations of *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* in commercial hot tubs, even at 3.0 ppm free chlorine. Yet, public health officials reported that none of the users experienced any illness. The investigators suggested that concentrations as high as 1,000 *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* per milliliter of water did not cause human illness.<sup>5</sup>

A second investigation confirmed that *Pseudomonas* is considerably less infectious than fecal germs, especially *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 (*E. coli*) and *Cryptosporidium* (*Crypto*), but did not determine the minimum effective free chlorine concentration.<sup>6</sup> *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* is well known for causing rashes, especially in hot tubs, and has recently been recognized as the leading cause of RWIs.<sup>7</sup> Until additional studies are completed, the best practice is to never allow the free chlorine concentration in hot tubs to drop below 2.0 ppm.

### Water balance issues

Without automated control, pH levels in hot tubs rise, especially when the jets are running. This is due to alkalinity off-gassing. The air injection system strips all the dissolved gases from the water. Since alkalinity in recreational water is actually dissolved carbon dioxide, the jets rapidly reduce it when those gases are stripped, raising the pH to around 8.3. As pH rises, the sanitizing efficacy of free chlorine decreases due to a shift in equilibrium toward hypochlorite. This is a primary reason why the free chlorine concentration in hot tubs must be higher than in pools.

Proper water balance in hot tubs is slightly different from that in pools. The continuously rising pH in non-automated tubs and the elevated temperature are the two drivers. Calcium ions have reduced solubility at elevated temperatures and pH. Without proper management, it is fairly easy to scale over a hot tub heater, especially if continually shocking with calcium hypochlorite. Overdosing any product in a hot tub will readily impact the overall water balance. Routinely calculating the Langelier Saturation Index (LSI) is more important in hot tubs than in pools. In general, maintaining lower calcium and alkalinity levels helps offset the tendency of elevated temperatures to promote scale formation.

### Conflicts in sanitization and water balance

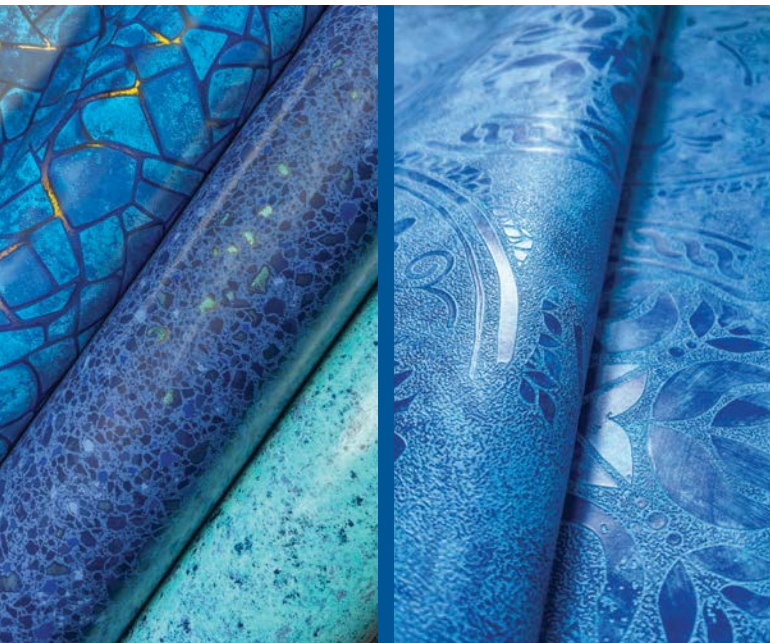
Managing the need for continuous sanitization to control germs while maintaining the correct water balance can lead to conflicting adjustment requirements. Since each type of chlorine has different secondary characteristics, each must be managed differently.

As with pools, the chlorine options include trichloroisocyanuric acid (trichlor), dichloroisocyanuric acid (dichlor), calcium hypochlorite (cal hypo), sodium hypochlorite (liquid chlorine), and chlorine generated via saltwater systems. No system is perfect, and each of these has advantages and disadvantages. Trichlor is easy to use and provides a consistent feed rate, but it lowers the pH. Dichlor dissolves almost instantly and does not change the pH or increase turbidity. Cal hypo increases calcium concentration and pH and often induces short-term turbidity. Liquid chlorine increases the pH and total dissolved solids

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**This page:** Test kits varying in price and accuracy. DPD (diethyl-p-phenylenediamine) kits are required for public venues and strongly encouraged for residential hot tubs. Meters are more accurate but require periodic recalibration.

PHOTO COURTESY DR. ROY VORE

**Opposite page:** Use an automated chlorine and pH control system managed by a certified operator.

(TDS). Salt systems increase the pH. So, which one should be used? Public health authorities generally advise against using trichlor, dichlor, or cyanuric acid in hot tubs.

The chemistry of each product is well-defined and not in dispute. However, the impact of cyanuric acid on sanitization is strongly disputed. The widely cited Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendation to avoid using any cyanuric acid in hot tubs first appeared as a footnote in the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*, which described two outbreaks in hot tubs.

Both hot tubs in the report were being operated on cal hypo, but neither was being properly managed. No scientific justification was offered in the footnote.<sup>8</sup> There is a theoretical possibility that elevated cyanuric acid reduces the efficacy against Giardia.<sup>9</sup> Giardia is a fecal RWI, and fecal pathogens are not an issue in hot tubs.<sup>10</sup> Thinking objectively, there is no single best option.

The challenge for the operator is to manage both the advantages and disadvantages of the selected chlorine source and to understand how each chlorine's secondary properties affect the overall water balance. This can only be accomplished by routinely testing all parameters, not just a quick check of free chlorine and an occasional pH check. Managing hot tubs is not a task for untrained personnel.

### Water replacement

Routine water replacement is essential in maintaining a properly sanitized and balanced hot tub. Draining, a quick wipe-down, refilling, balancing, and sanitizing are almost always quicker and less costly than repeated chemical treatments after an extended period of tub use.

The most reliable indicator of usage is the TDS concentration. TDS increase is due to the accumulation of non-volatile ions, such as calcium and sodium, organic compounds, including cyanuric acid, and bather waste, such as perspiration and oils. For service providers, there are easy-to-use handheld meters that read out in a few seconds. Once the TDS concentration exceeds the initial balance concentration by 1,500 ppm, the accumulation is excessive. A more involved method uses the formula: Litres of water in the tub divided by 11.4, divided by the estimated number of bathers per day (Gallons of water in the hot tub divided by three, divided by the estimated number of bathers per day) equals the replacement interval.

The replacement interval is the frequency at which the hot tub should be completely drained and refilled.<sup>11</sup> At the very least, residential hot tubs should be drained, cleaned, and refilled every 90 days.

### Best practices

*Commercial hot tubs (including hotels and health clubs)*

- Use an automated chlorine and pH control system managed by a certified operator.
- Manually test the chemistry at least once per day or as required by local regulations.
- Completely drain and replace the water frequently.
- Once the TDS exceeds the initial balanced concentration by 1,500 ppm, it is time for a complete water replacement.

*Residential hot tubs*

- Check the sanitizer and pH before every use and adjust if necessary.
- Shock the tub after every use.
- If shocking with liquid chlorine or cal hypo, adjust the pH down immediately.
- Drain the tub completely at least every three months and refill it with fresh potable water, then balance it.

*All hot tubs*

If the tub has not been maintained properly:

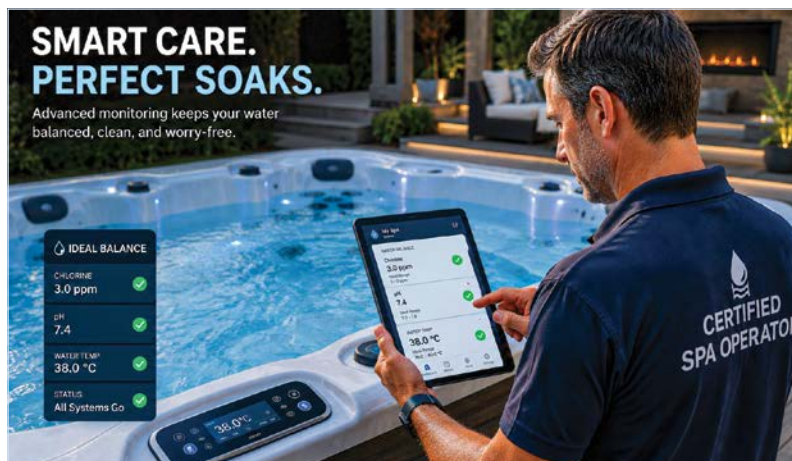
- Do not use it and do not turn on jets. There could be Legionella in the water.
- Completely drain the water, flush the systems with a spa purge, refill, rebalance, and add sanitizer before use.

If the foam persists for more than two minutes after the jets are turned off, stop use immediately:

- If the calcium is less than 150 ppm, add calcium and retest.
- If the calcium is more than 150 ppm, the concentration of organic matter is too high. Completely drain the water, flush the systems with a spa purge, refill, rebalance, and add sanitizer before use.
- Persistent foam is from the excess accumulation of organic compounds from bathers. It is concentrated DBPs and germs. Foam is proof that the “people soup” has become quite obnoxious.
- When in doubt for any reason, stop use and check with an expert on the proper treatment. The customer service departments of chlorine and bromine manufacturers are readily available and reliable sources of information. 🏊

#### Notes

See notes online at [poolspamarketing.com/hot-tub-management](http://poolspamarketing.com/hot-tub-management)



**Dr. Roy Vore** is a pool operator, researcher, and instructor specializing in recreational water management, float tanks, and aquatic regulations. He has been a Certified Pool & Spa Operator (CPO) and instructor for more than a decade and has conducted research on microbial control since 1991. Vore has authored more than 100 papers and contributed to industry guidance, including the Model Aquatic Health Code (MAHC) and the *Recreational Water Illness Handbook*.

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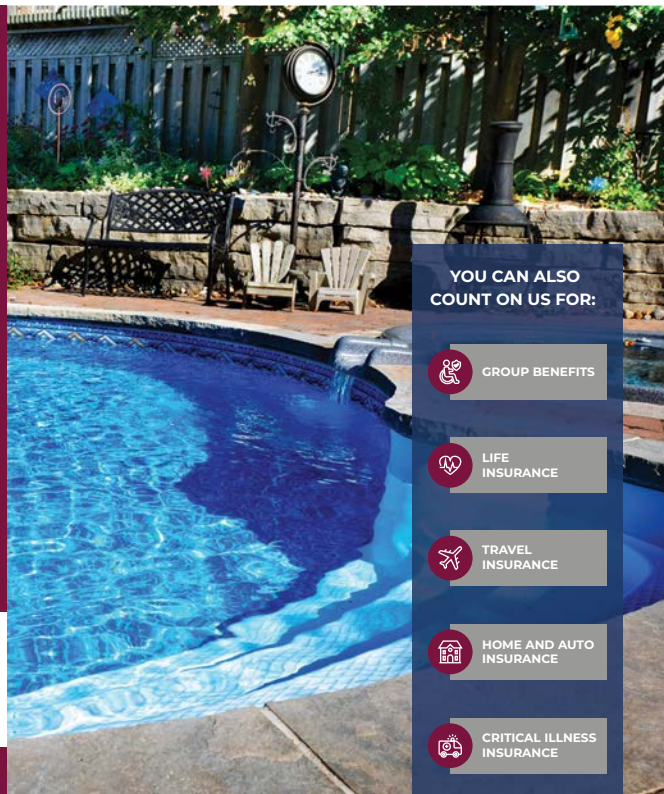
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# Cordless, Lightweight, and Always Ready

By Guy Erlich

PHOTO COURTESY  
WATER TECH CORP.

## Why Battery-powered Pool Vacuums Are a Must for Today's Service Pros

**Portable, battery-operated vacuums** have evolved from a convenience to an essential tool for pool service technicians. By reducing setup time and physical strain, they support more efficient routes and create opportunities to expand service offerings. They are also used to expand capacity on service routes by reducing time spent on setup and handling.

Experienced technicians often point to advances in equipment as a major shift in how work is completed. The move from hose-based systems to lightweight, cordless units has improved mobility and reduced labour demands.

"I'm 72 years old, and I still work 12 hours a day cleaning pools, but I couldn't get through my day without a battery-operated pool cleaner," says Karen Whitton, a.k.a. "The Pool Lady." "Traditional cleaners with all those hoses are incredibly heavy and cumbersome, and

it takes so much time just to carry them to the pool, then hook them up before you can even get started cleaning."

Battery-powered, handheld vacuums address common challenges encountered on service routes. Their independence from pool systems allows cleaning to occur alongside maintenance tasks such as pump or motor servicing, improving workflow efficiency. It also allows technicians to sequence their work differently, prioritizing cleaning or repairs based on site conditions rather than being tied to system operation. This added flexibility can help streamline more complex service calls.

"For example, I now have a helper who uses the battery-powered cleaner to clean the pool while I work on the pump," says Whitton. "That is something you can't do with a traditional hose cleaner because it requires the use of the pump."



**Top:** For Karen “The Pool Lady” Whitton, battery-operated pool cleaners have become essential for reducing setup time and physical strain, making it possible to work long service days efficiently.

PHOTO COURTESY  
THE POOL LADY



**Bottom:** The move from hose-based systems to lightweight, cordless units has improved mobility and reduced labor demands for technicians.

PHOTO COURTESY WATER  
TECH CORP.

### What sets battery-powered vacuums apart

Manufacturers have expanded their offerings to include a range of portable units suited to different cleaning needs, from light-duty spot cleaning to heavy-duty debris removal. Interchangeable debris bags support the removal of both fine particles and larger material. Available configurations include units designed for spot cleaning, standard residential service, and removal of heavier debris. Technicians often select models based on how consistent or varied their routes are, with some favouring versatile units that can handle a range of conditions without switching equipment. This can reduce the need to carry multiple specialized tools.

Cordless vacuums also reach areas often missed by traditional systems, including steps, corners, benches, and shallow-end transitions.

“Traditional pool cleaners make it difficult to get into tight corners, especially around step areas, but those are the areas that get the dirtiest. These areas are often the most noticeable to pool owners, particularly in shallow sections,” says Whitton.

### Use across every service stop

For many technicians, handheld vacuums are no longer reserved for problem situations. Service routes can include eight to 12 pools per day, reducing setup time and handling significantly over the course of a shift. Instead, they are integrated into daily service routines to improve efficiency and reduce physical strain.

Automatic cleaners perform well in open floor areas but are less effective in confined or detailed sections of the pool (*i.e.* steps, benches, seats, and shallow-end transitions). A handheld unit enables targeted cleaning without the setup required for hose-based systems, allowing technicians to maintain consistent results across all pool areas.

Spas are a frequent use case because debris is more visible in smaller bodies of water; maintaining a clean appearance during each visit is especially important. Compact, battery-powered portable vacuums allow quick removal of visible debris in small, high-traffic areas, helping achieve a more polished finish during routine service visits.



**Top:** Cordless vacuums reach areas often missed by traditional systems, including steps, corners, and transitions in the shallow end.

PHOTOS COURTESY THE POOL LADY

**Bottom:** Karen "The Pool Lady" Whitton's helper, Jerry Peña, uses their battery-operated vacuum "Otto" to clean while service and maintenance tasks are completed simultaneously, streamlining complex service calls.



### The hidden revenue opportunity

Some service companies estimate time savings of up to 10 minutes per pool. While this can shorten routes, it also allows technicians to assess equipment

conditions and engage with clients. It also allows time to inspect equipment and note issues that may require repair or replacement.

"Not only have I discovered that equipment isn't working properly, but I have also learned that clients are interested in solutions they see being used during service," says Whitton.

Additional time on-site can help identify maintenance needs or upgrade opportunities, including pumps, filtration systems, or sanitation equipment. This shift supports a more consultative service approach, where technicians contribute to both maintenance and revenue generation.

Over multiple service calls, incremental time savings can translate into significant operational gains. Technicians are better positioned to monitor system performance, recommend replacements, and proactively maintain equipment.

### Application across environments

Portable vacuums are effective across a range of operating conditions. Debris can range from fine sand and silt to organic material such as leaves, needles, and other particulate matter. In coastal areas, they assist with removing sand and fine debris. In dry or windy regions, they address frequent dust and particulate matter accumulation.

Tree-heavy neighbourhoods present additional challenges, including organic debris such as leaves and needles. Interchangeable filtration options allow technicians to adapt to these varying conditions.

Event-driven cleanups also benefit from portable systems. This is particularly relevant when pools must be restored quickly following weather events or in preparation for gatherings. Battery-powered vacuums can restore conditions quickly and efficiently.

### Maintenance and organization

Consistent maintenance practices are essential to maximizing performance. This includes regular charging, keeping spare batteries available, and ensuring equipment is organized within the service vehicle. For companies with multiple technicians, establishing consistent routines across teams helps ensure equipment is used and maintained consistently, reducing variability in service quality.

"We always charge every evening so the unit is ready to go all day the next day," says Whitton.

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## Best practices for keeping units ready

- Charge units at the end of each day
- Keep spare batteries ready
- Store accessories in a consistent location
- Use in-vehicle charging when needed
- Maintain organization to avoid downtime 🏊



**Top:** Some service companies estimate time savings of up to 10 minutes per pool, allowing more time to assess equipment and engage with clients.

**Bottom left:** Compact, battery-powered portable vacuums allow quick removal of visible debris in small, high-traffic areas such as spas.

**Bottom right:** Battery-powered pool vacuums represent a practical advancement in service efficiency, supporting both day-to-day operations and long-term business growth.

Many battery-powered pool cleaners often come with two lithium batteries, a wall charger, a car charger, three high-volume discharge valves, three high-volume filter bags, two vacuum heads, and a shoulder strap, allowing technicians to maintain continuous operation throughout the day.

In-route charging can help prevent downtime during peak service periods. The battery lasts at least two hours of continuous runtime, and the car charger is particularly practical: a technician can top off the spare battery between stops, ensuring there is always a fully charged battery available when the primary battery runs down mid-route. During peak season, when routes are dense and downtime is not an option, that kind of operational discipline makes a measurable difference.

## A tool that earns its place on every route

Battery-powered vacuums offer both operational and strategic value. They reduce time spent on setup and breakdown while enabling technicians to focus on service quality, equipment assessment, and client interaction.

For service companies, this shift supports a more efficient and proactive business model. Time saved during cleaning can be reinvested into higher-value activities that improve both service outcomes and revenue potential.

“Having time to chat with clients is invaluable and not always measurable,” says Whitton. “I’ve been doing this job for more than 30 years and using these cleaners for over 16 years, and the extra time I gain on the job site lets me get to know my clients and their families better.”

Battery-powered pool vacuums are no longer a gadget or a novelty. They represent a practical advancement in service efficiency, supporting both day-to-day operations and long-term business growth. In today’s competitive market, it is worth asking professionals who have not made the switch: What are you doing with those extra 10 minutes? 🏊



**Guy Erlich** is the founder and president of Water Tech Corp., a manufacturer of a variety of hoseless, battery-powered pool and hot tub cleaner brands based in East Brunswick, N.J. He can be reached via email at [guy@watertechcorp.com](mailto:guy@watertechcorp.com).



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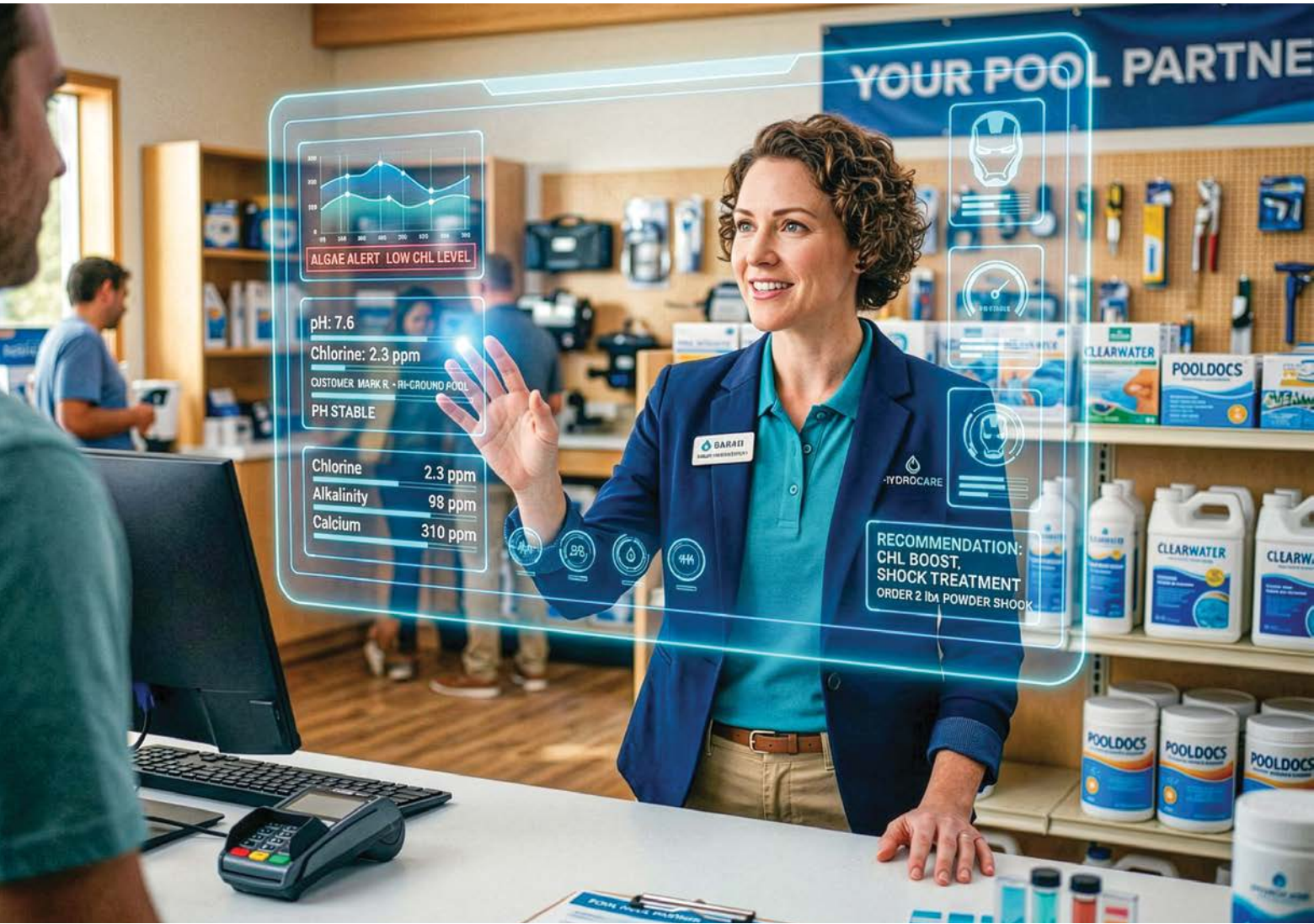


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By Dennis Gray

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# The Intelligent Dealership

## Why Augmented Human Intelligence is the Pro Channel's Advantage

**Tony Stark is not the strongest or fastest** member of the Avengers, nor can he fly without his suit. What sets Iron Man apart is not raw power. Still, his decision-making is supported by an artificial

intelligence (AI) system—J.A.R.V.I.S (Just a Really Very Intelligent System)—that enhances, rather than replaces, his judgment. The system analyzes information in real time, manages complex tasks, and

provides immediate access to technical knowledge. The outcome remains driven by the individual—the technology extends capability, but the decision-making stays human.

Strip away the Hollywood, and this is the most important business model shift of the next decade. Every independent backyard leisure dealer in the professional channel is about to face a choice between three futures.

#### *Future 1: Replacement*

AI replaces teams through automated chatbots, algorithmic scheduling, and commodity service. The dealer becomes a warehouse with a sign out front and an algorithm behind the counter.

#### *Future 2: Augmentation*

Similar to Iron Man's suit, AI becomes the system that supports the team—elevating each technician, retail associate, and service advisor to perform at a higher level from the outset. Humans remain at the centre, and the technology amplifies what they can do.

#### *Future 3: Complacency*

This is the one nobody talks about at conferences because it is too uncomfortable to name. The dealer who decides this is all hype, that their customers value the handshake, a handwritten invoice, and the same phone number from the Yellow Pages. The dealer who faces tomorrow with yesterday's tools, trusting that tradition will outlast transformation. No AI replacement. No AI augmentation. Just a slow, steady erosion of market share as tech-savvy competitors quietly overtake them. There is no dramatic implosion—just the gradual shrinking of the mailing list, the thinning of foot traffic, and the slow realization that their most loyal clients have slipped away, now reordering chlorine on a smartphone with free next-day delivery. The end does not arrive with a bang, but with the silence of missed opportunity.

The first future eliminates jobs, the second eliminates the knowledge gap, and the third eliminates the dealership slowly enough that business owners can pretend it is not happening.

The second future is described as augmented human intelligence (AHI), and for the professional channel, it may represent the most significant competitive advantage to emerge in a generation.

### **This is not a better search engine**

It is important to address the biggest misconception first, because it is the one costing dealers the most. Most



people who have tried AI tools, such as ChatGPT, Google's Gemini, and/or Microsoft Copilot, treat them like a more conversational Google search. Ask a question; get an answer and move on. In this case, AI is mildly impressive and moderately useful, but a novelty that wears off. If this is a dealer's experience of AI, they have only seen a fraction of its potential.

The data on this is significant. According to Microsoft's 2025 Work Trend Index, 75 per cent of knowledge workers now report using AI, nearly double the rate from just six months prior. More importantly, 60 per cent of those workers say they lack the skills to use AI effectively. Three-quarters of the workforce has the tool, but fewer than half understand what it can actually do.

Consider this in terms of competitive advantage. If a dealer and four competitors all have access to the same AI technology—but only one has learned to use it beyond the basics—they are operating with capabilities the others do not yet recognize. At that point, the competition is no longer on equal footing.

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,” science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke wrote in 1973. In a dealership setting, that can look like a second-year associate diagnosing complex water chemistry issues, such as chloramine lock, organic contamination, and falling pH, etc., with the diagnostic precision of a 30-year veteran. To the customer at the counter, the difference is difficult to distinguish.

It is not magic or simply a search tool. It represents a fundamentally different way of working, where the human provides judgment, empathy, and accountability. In contrast, the AI provides pattern recognition, recall, and computational speed at a scale no individual can match.

Returning to the Iron Man analogy: the suit does not make Tony Stark less important; it enhances his ability to perform at a higher level. That is the promise of AHI—not

**In the future where AI replaces full teams, a dealer becomes a warehouse with a sign out front and algorithm behind the counter.**



**Top:** The third future: a quiet decline—the parking lot empties one customer at a time while competitors move forward.

**Bottom:** The exponential gap: early adopters thrive with AI-augmented teams while traditional dealerships fall behind.

for superheroes, but for pool technicians, retail associates, and dealership owners looking to compete more effectively, regardless of scale.

### The early adopter window is closing

The strategic implication is significant. A Harvard Business School study of 758 management consultants at Boston Consulting Group found those using AI completed tasks 25 per cent faster and produced results 40 per cent higher in quality. Junior consultants—the least experienced—saw a 43 per cent improvement in performance, representing a substantial gain in capability at the entry level.

Applied to a dealership setting, the impact is clear. A new retail hire or junior technician—typically requiring months to reach basic competence—could operate at a significantly higher level early on with the right tools and training. This is not simply a productivity gain; it represents a structural competitive advantage. At present, few in the backyard leisure industry are operating at this level.

The same Harvard study identified two effective approaches to AI use: “centaur” and “cyborg” models. In the centaur approach, workers divide tasks strategically—relying on AI for speed and analysis while retaining human judgment for decision-making. In the cyborg approach, AI is fully integrated into the workflow,

with continuous collaboration between the individual and the technology.

Both approaches proved effective. A third approach did not: accepting AI output without review. In those cases, the study found performance was 19 per cent lower than for workers who did not use AI at all.

The distinction is clear. AHI is not about handing off decisions to technology, but using it to support them. The individual remains responsible for judgment, while the system contributes speed, analysis, and recall. As with Iron Man, the technology supports the decision-making—it does not replace it.

### The exponential gap

AI capability is advancing at an accelerating pace, with improvements compounding over time rather than progressing in a straight line. What the technology can do today is already significantly ahead of where it was just months ago, and that rate of change continues.

This is contributing to a widening gap between early adopters and those slower to respond. Microsoft’s Work Trend Index refers to early adopters as “frontier firms” organizations restructuring around AI-human hybrid supported teams. Among these firms, 90 per cent of AI power users report more manageable workloads, and 85 per cent begin their day using AI tools.

The impact is also reflected in workforce outcomes. Employees who have developed AI proficiency are seeing measurable gains in value, with wage premiums increasing from 25 per cent to 56 per cent within a year. The market is increasingly recognizing AI fluency as a critical skill, reinforcing an exponential gap in which early adopters advance while traditional dealerships fall behind.

For dealerships, the window remains open. Adoption across the industry is still limited, meaning those who move now are not gaining a marginal advantage, but a structural one. In an environment where capabilities are advancing rapidly, those advantages can compound over time.

### Flip the script: The human is the hero

The dominant narrative around AI is often built on a single assumption: that its primary value lies in replacing human labour. Much of the discussion around automation, efficiency gains, and job displacement reflects this perspective.

In commodity industries, that premise applies—particularly where work is repetitive and cost-driven. However, the backyard leisure market operates differently; it is not a commodity industry, or at least it should not be.

The professional channel is built on expertise, relationships, and accountability. The reason independent dealers exist alongside Home Depot and Amazon is that expertise has value. These businesses continue to differentiate themselves by offering informed guidance, service continuity, a level of trust that extends beyond the transaction, and the value of being able to look a homeowner in the eye and say, "If this does not work, I'll fix it."

Viewed through that lens, the question shifts. It is not how to replace people with AI, but how to use these tools to enhance their capabilities and strengthen the value they deliver.

This is where the script flips, and AHI emerges as an approach that combines human judgment with technological support to improve performance, consistency, and service outcomes.

### Three principles of augmented human intelligence

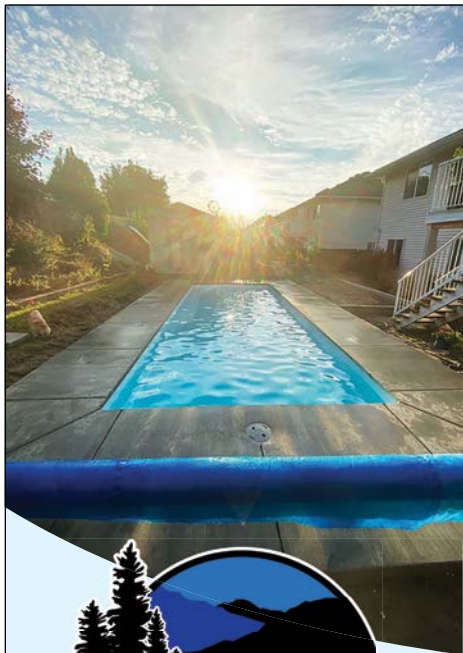
1. The human remains central. AI provides data, recommendations, and pattern recognition, while the individual brings judgment, empathy, and accountability.

In a retail setting, the associate determines how to respond to a customer, while AI can provide technical guidance in real time. Trust remains with the individual.

2. Knowledge compounds, not retires. When experienced technicians retire, decades of diagnostic knowledge often leave with them. AHI captures that expertise and makes it accessible across the team. Rather than being lost, that knowledge can be retained and built upon, with each diagnosis, solution, and insight contributing to a growing base of institutional experience.

3. The competitive advantage is human, not technical. Large retailers can adopt the same software and tools, but they cannot replicate team-specific expertise or localized knowledge. Independent dealers differentiate themselves through experience grounded in their market, their customers, and their day-to-day operations. AI can support and extend that expertise, but it does not replace it.

The AHI team: owner, technician, and retail associate—each supported by AI, each responsible for delivering value within their role.



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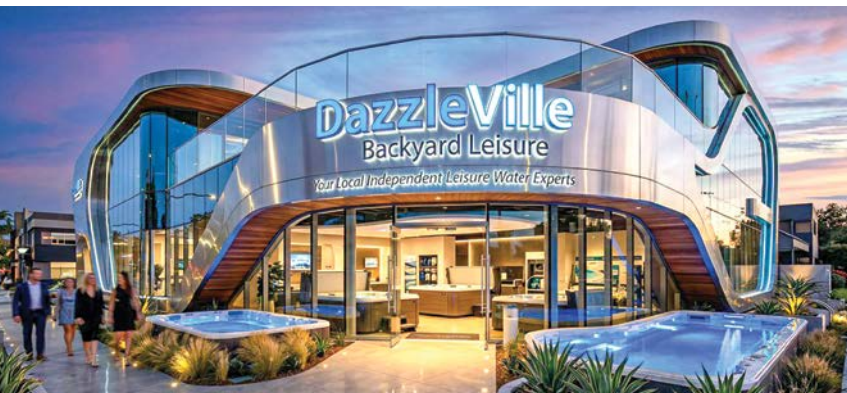
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The augmented human intelligence (AHI) team: owner, technician, and retail associate, each augmented by AI, are each the hero to their role.

### The risk of standing still

It is important to consider the opposing view. Some dealer owners may question the relevance of AI, noting that their businesses have operated successfully without it and that customers continue to value personal service. There is also a degree of caution shaped by experience.

That perspective reflects practical experience, not resistance. Dealers have seen technologies introduced with high expectations that did not deliver long-term value—tools that went underused, platforms that prioritized reporting over customer needs, and training initiatives tied to systems that quickly became outdated.

What is different in this cycle is the pace of adoption. Competitors are already integrating AI into their operations. Mobile service companies are using it to optimize routing, automate communication, and streamline routine service calls. Large retailers are applying AI to scale recommendations based on purchasing patterns, rather than relying solely on technical expertise. Amazon's algorithm does not need to understand water chemistry; it just needs to know what other pool owners with the same postal code purchased.

At the same time, staff are increasingly turning to general-purpose AI tools in the field. In areas such as water chemistry, these tools can provide broad guidance, but they are not tailored to specific products, regional conditions, or established service protocols. In some cases, that lack of context can lead to inaccurate or incomplete recommendations.

The issue is not whether AI will enter the business—it already has. The more important question is whether it is adopted in a way that reflects a dealer's expertise, product knowledge, and service standards, or remains a generic tool with limited alignment with the operation.

Research such as the Harvard study reinforces this distinction. Workers who rely on AI output without verification can perform worse than those who do not use

it at all. In a specialized field, the use of unconfigured tools can introduce risk rather than reduce it. For dealerships, the priority is not simply adoption, but ensuring that AI is applied in a controlled and informed way that supports, rather than undermines, service quality.

### Four skills to building an 'Iron Man' advantage across teams

Becoming an intelligent dealership does not require a computer science degree, specialized technical training, or dedicated IT roles. It requires the existing team to develop a set of practical skills closer to effective communication arts and problem definition than to engineering.

In practice, the value lies in clearly identifying what is needed and communicating that effectively to the system. As with Iron Man, the advantage comes not from understanding the underlying technology, but from applying domain knowledge—whether in water chemistry, equipment, or customer service—in a way that allows the technology to support decision-making at a higher level.

#### *Skill 1: Choosing the tools (paid versus free)*

This is a foundational decision that is often misunderstood at the dealership level.

Entry-level AI tools, such as free versions of ChatGPT, Gemini, or Copilot, demonstrate the potential of the technology, but they are limited in capability. They typically rely on less advanced models, have usage constraints, and do not retain information between sessions. They also do not offer the same level of data control, meaning inputs may be used to improve broader models. As a result, each interaction begins without context, limiting their effectiveness in a service environment.

Paid AI tools, typically ranging from \$15 to \$30 per user per month, operate at a more advanced level. They offer improved response speed, greater context capacity, stronger reasoning capabilities, and more consistent data handling. They also support persistent configurations, enabling the system to retain information about products, processes, and terminology over time.

From an operational standpoint, the cost is modest relative to typical service revenue. For most dealerships, the investment is less than the value of a single service call per month, making the return measurable in practical terms.

#### *Skill 2: Prompt engineering*

Prompt engineering is the skill of communicating effectively with AI, much as an experienced manager

provides direction to a new employee with clarity, context, and specificity.

The difference is reflected in the outcome. The “Google approach”—a general query such as “my pool is cloudy, what do I do?”—typically yields broad, nonspecific guidance. The result is generic advice that may apply in principle but lacks the detail needed for a specific situation.

By contrast, the “Iron Man” approach reflects how experienced technicians think: “I’m a pool technician in Calgary. The customer’s 40,000-L (10,566-gal) vinyl-lined pool has been cloudy for three days after a heavy rainstorm. Total chlorine reads 5 parts per million (ppm), free chlorine reads 0.5 ppm, and the pH is 7.8. Last treatment was a calcium hypochlorite (cal hypo) shock four days ago. The diatomaceous earth (DE) filter was last backwashed two days ago. What’s the most likely cause, and what’s the correct treatment sequence using the dealer’s product line?”

The result is a specific, actionable diagnosis—combined chloramine problem with organic contamination from storm runoff—along with a product-specific treatment sequence, dosing calculations, and an expected timeline to resolution.

The underlying technology is the same. The difference lies entirely in a person’s skill at communicating what they need. That is the gap between searching and collaborating, between using AI as a search engine and using AI as a thought partner.

Experienced technicians already think in structured, contextual ways. Developing prompt engineering skills across the team makes that instinctive expertise explicit, transferable, and scalable.

#### *Skill 3: Concept engineering*

This is where AI moves beyond a general-purpose tool and begins to support competitive differentiation. Generic AI can define terms such as “algae.” Still, it does not account for how those issues manifest in a specific market, how customers commonly misunderstand them, or how they relate to a specific phosphate removal system that the dealership offers, but its competitors do not. It also lacks the context to interpret how customers describe problems in practice—for example, “my pool keeps turning green” may indicate an underlying issue rather than a surface condition.

Concept engineering is the practice of teaching AI to think within the dealership’s domain knowledge. It involves defining the concepts, relationships, and decision frameworks that underpin day-to-day

expertise, and structuring them so the system can apply that knowledge consistently in real time.

As with Iron Man, the advantage comes from how the system is informed. The technology becomes more effective when it reflects specific operational knowledge—whether related to equipment, chemistry, or customer scenarios—rather than relying solely on general information.

In this context, a dealership that has concept-engineered its AI tools has cloned its best person’s decision-making framework and made it available to every team member. AI does not replace expertise; it extends it. When properly configured, it allows experienced decision-making approaches to be applied more consistently across the team, supporting performance and service quality at every interaction.

#### *Skill 4: The context window*

This is a common limitation that many AI users do not initially recognize—and it helps explain why results can appear inconsistent.

AI systems operate within a defined “context window,” which determines how much information they can retain during a conversation. It can be understood as the system’s working memory. Entry-level tools typically handle a smaller volume of information, while more advanced versions offer significantly greater capacity.

When a conversation exceeds that limit, earlier information may be dropped to make room for new input. As a result, the system can lose important context, affecting the accuracy and consistency of its responses. For general tasks, such as drafting or summarizing, this may have minimal impact. In technical applications—such as diagnosing equipment issues or performing multi-step treatment processes—maintaining context is critical to reliable outcomes.

Managing this effectively involves practical habits: knowing when to begin a new interaction, clearly defining key details at the outset, and reinforcing important information as needed. As teams become more familiar with these practices, consistency improves and the technology becomes more dependable in day-to-day use.

### **The intelligent dealership: A day in the suit**

Here is what an AHI-equipped dealership can look like in practice.

Sarah has been on the retail floor for eight months. Before AHI, a customer presenting with a complex



The intelligent dealership of tomorrow: architecture that signals expertise and innovation.

water chemistry cascade—high combined chlorine, falling pH, and persistent cloudiness after a storm—would have required calling Robert, the store’s senior technician. Robert retired in November. Under the previous model, Sarah may have needed to say, “Let me have someone follow up with you,” which would have delayed the interaction and potentially lost the customer to another retailer.

Under the AHI model, Sarah opens her AI assistant—her equivalent of J.A.R.V.I.S—and provides the relevant details: water volume, test results, filter type, recent treatments, and regional water source. Within seconds, she receives a diagnosis aligned with what an experienced technician would provide, along with a product-specific treatment sequence, dosing guidance, and follow-up protocol. She walks the customer through the solution with confidence and schedules a follow-up water test for Thursday.

The customer leaves with the product, with confidence, and with a reason to return on Thursday. They also leave with a story about the dealership where a relatively new associate diagnosed the issue in minutes.

To that customer, Sarah presents with the confidence of a seasoned technician. This is not a replacement of expertise, it is an example of augmentation. Sarah brings interpersonal skills, empathy, and trust that technology cannot replicate. What she lacks in experience is supported by AI-driven pattern recognition. The individual remains responsible for the interaction; the system supports the outcome.

Sarah is not using AI as a search tool. She is not entering a general query reviewing broad results. She is working with a system informed by her domain, her products, and her regional conditions. The interaction is collaborative rather than transactional. That is the distinction, and that is AHI.

Sarah diagnoses a complex water chemistry cascade

with AI-supported confidence—the customer sees a 10-year veteran.

“We do not build systems that know instead of people. We build systems that know because of people.” This is the AHI principle.

This approach is already applied in practice. Platforms built on this model are in use across Canadian dealerships and are designed to support industries where expertise and applied knowledge are central to performance. The technology is available, the methodology is established, and adoption remains in its early stages.

The remaining factor is whether dealerships choose to implement it.

### What comes next

The backyard leisure industry is facing a knowledge gap. As experienced tradespeople retire, fewer new entrants are stepping in to replace them, creating pressure on training and knowledge transfer.

However, that expertise need not be lost. With the right approach, it can be captured, structured, and made accessible across the team at key points in the customer interaction.

This is not a shift toward replacing people with technology. It is an approach that uses AI to support and extend human capability, helping teams deliver more consistent, informed, and confident outcomes.

In this model, the dealership becomes the environment where that capability is applied in practice. The future of AI is human. 🦋

**Author’s note:** This article is the first in a four-part series. *Part 2, Becoming AI-Fluent*, focuses on practical strategies for prompting and context management. *Part 3, The AHI Dealership in Action*, examines seven real-world use cases across dealership operations. *Part 4, Sage, Rocky, and the Knowledge Harvest*, explores tools designed to support knowledge retention and long-term competitiveness.



**Dennis Gray** is president of Backyard Brands Inc., supporting independent Canadian pool and spa dealers across a national network. He has more than 40 years of experience developing and marketing advanced water-care technologies. He is the architect of the Augmented Human Intelligence (AHI) platform, currently deployed across more than 260 dealerships.



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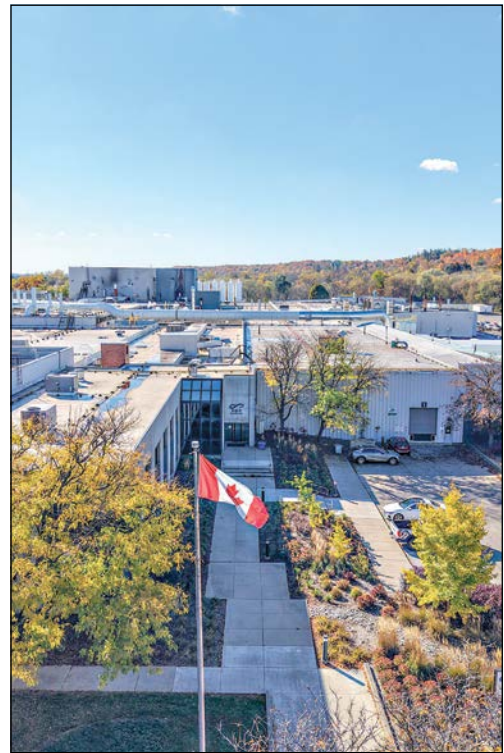
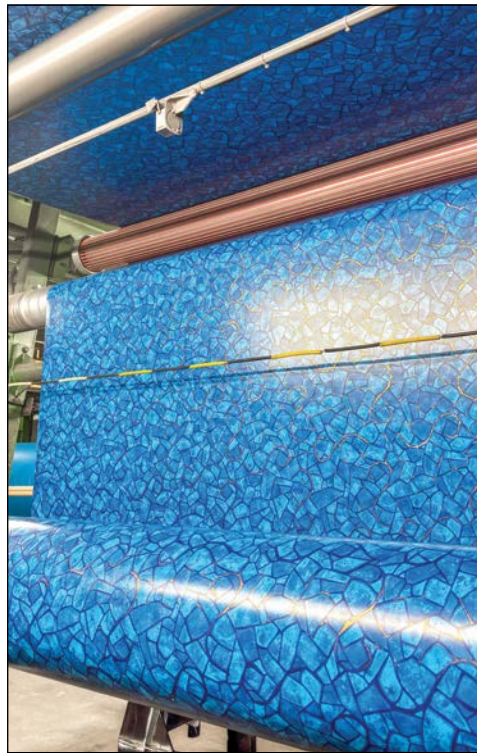
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## Expanding National Reach with Regional Strength

Aquiform Distribution continues to strengthen its position in Canada's pool and spa industry through strategic expansion and enhanced regional operations. With growing capabilities in Winnipeg and Calgary, the organization is improving national service coverage, reducing delivery timelines, and expanding support for retail partners nationwide.

Aquiform East's Burlington, Ontario facility remains a key fulfillment hub. Ongoing investment in warehouse optimization, inventory systems, and logistics infrastructure is improving order accuracy and streamlining fulfillment. These enhancements ensure more efficient and reliable product delivery during peak seasonal demand.

## Advancing Operational Excellence Through Logistics Innovation

A core focus of Aquiform's growth strategy is operational efficiency. Through modernized warehouse systems and refined distribution workflows, the company is improving performance across the supply chain—from inventory management to final delivery.

These improvements reduce operational friction for retail partners, enabling faster response times, improved stock availability, and more consistent seasonal execution. By strengthening its logistics foundation, Aquiform supports retailers in maintaining efficiency during high-demand periods.

## Driving Digital Transformation in Retail Ordering

Alongside logistics enhancements, Aquiform continues to invest in digital transformation. Its online ordering platform—enhanced with more than 100 upgrades for 2026—now delivers a more intuitive and efficient purchasing experience.

Key features include improved visual search, dealer-specific saved lists, streamlined account management, and quick-order functionality designed to reduce manual processing and improve accuracy.

A key addition is the Above-Ground Pool Configurator, which enables retailers to build complete pool packages in just



a few clicks. By simplifying bundling and reducing manual steps, it improves consistency and shortens ordering time.

## Built on Trust and Long-Term Partnerships

Aquiform's growth is supported by long-standing relationships with retail partners across Canada. The company's reputation is built on reliable fulfillment, consistent service quality, and responsive support, positioning it as a trusted distribution partner in the industry.

Digital tools and the ordering portal continue to play a central role in this experience, with dealer feedback highlighting ease of use and efficiency. As one partner noted:

"I am thrilled with your service provided so far and love your ordering portal. You are miles ahead of competitors in both areas" – Dilyn (Mor In Pools & Spas)

Retailer feedback consistently highlights product condition, operational reliability, and team responsiveness as key strengths, reinforcing Aquiform's role in supporting business continuity across diverse markets.

## Looking Ahead

As the pool and spa sector evolves, Aquiform Distribution remains focused on innovation, operational efficiency, and long-term partnership development. Through continued investment in logistics infrastructure and digital tools, the company supports retailers in scaling operations, improving performance, and delivering strong customer experiences across Canada.



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# Built for Access. Built to Last.

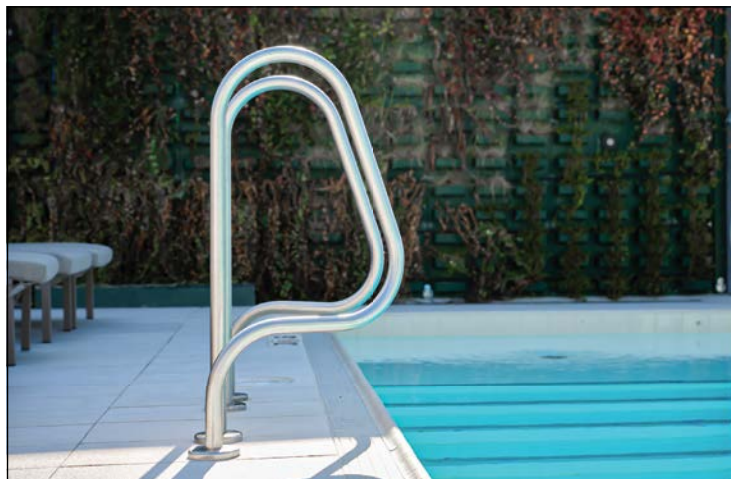
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As a premier manufacturer of pool and spa access equipment, Aqua Creek offers a wide range of solutions for nearly any aquatic environment imaginable. Best known for its industry-leading pool lifts, the company continues to innovate with products engineered for durability, reliability, and long-term performance. For unique applications, Aqua Creek's in-house engineering team works directly with customers to customize solutions tailored to specific facility needs.

Innovation has always been central to the Aqua Creek philosophy. The company was the first manufacturer to offer custom color-matched pool lifts to align with school branding and facility aesthetics. Aqua Creek was also the first and only pool lift manufacturer in America to introduce solar-powered lift options, helping facilities reduce energy consumption while extending battery life.

Aqua Creek has long been recognized as an industry leader in compliance and safety standards. The company was the first pool lift manufacturer to have lifts independently verified to meet ADA regulations and continues to offer one of the industry's largest selections of UL-compliant pool lifts. Aqua Creek also served on the UL Standards Technical Panel that helped develop the current pool lift safety standards. Reinforcing its commitment to quality and continuous improvement, Aqua Creek is proudly ISO-certified.

Expanding beyond lifts, Aqua Creek now offers ADA-compliant rails and ladders manufactured with the same attention to craftsmanship, dependable lead times, and meticulous packaging that customers have come to expect.



In addition to access equipment, Aqua Creek manufactures a growing line of specialty PVC aquatic products, including aquatic wheelchairs, walkers, and its highly durable swim training platforms. Designed for aquatic therapy, swim instruction, and recreational programming, these products help facilities support users of all abilities while standing up to demanding commercial environments.

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# Covering all possibilities



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MARKETPLACE 



**Designed by Kenneth Morgan Pools & Landscaping Inc. of Vaughan, Ont.,** this backyard blends formal architecture with resort-inspired outdoor living. The project centres on a 10.4 x 4.9-m (34 x 16-ft) vinyl-lined pool set within a symmetrical landscape of large-format pavers, manicured lawn inlays, and layered planting beds. The rectangular pool serves as the property's visual anchor, framed by clean coping lines, lounge terraces, and elevated patios that connect directly to the home's curved brick facade. Wide entry steps span the shallow end, while surrounding chaise lounges and seating areas create multiple zones for relaxation and entertaining. A custom cabana extends the backyard's architectural language with matching brick detailing, integrated lighting, and covered gathering spaces. Inside, the structure features stainless-steel appliances, a built-in barbecue, audio-visual entertainment systems, and a wood-burning fireplace for evening use after swimming. Expansive upper- and lower-level terraces overlook the pool, creating visual continuity between the residence and the landscape. Glass railings, geometric walkways, and layered greenery soften the formal layout while maintaining unobstructed sightlines across the property. Mature trees and dense perimeter plantings enhance privacy, creating a secluded atmosphere within the urban setting. 

—*Jason Cramp*

PHOTO COURTESY KENNETH MORGAN POOLS & LANDSCAPING INC.



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