

July 17, 2011

Rima Calderon, Vice-President-Communications and External Relations
Kris Coratti, Director, Public Relations/Communications
The Washington Post
1150 15th St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20071

Dear Ms. Calderon and Ms. Coratti,

For 134 years, *The Washington Post* has published exceptional journalism on printed pages. In 1996, this content was made available on a dedicated website. Now, the newspaper looks ahead to the next step in its evolution.

On March 1, 2012, *The Washington Post* will begin charging a subscription fee for full access to its website, www.washingtonpost.com. As this date approaches, the newspaper's top priority is informing key audiences about the details of the payment plan.

As of October 2010, circulation of *The Washington Post* was down 6.4%. For the measurement period preceding, circulation was down 13%. *The New York Times* instituted an online pay plan in March 2011 with mixed media and public reaction. Consumers are hesitant to pay for content they have accessed at no charge since newspapers appeared online and may view a pay model with contempt. If the new pay plan is not explained carefully, these circulation figures may drop even further.

I have extensive experience in public relations, journalism, and marketing, among other communications-related expertise. Details on my qualifications can be found in my résumé located in this document's appendix. My range of industrial knowledge affords me a unique foundation from which to craft the most effective strategy for communicating the details of the *Post*'s new online pay plan. I earned a B.A. in Communications Studies from Ursinus College (Collegedale, PA) in 2002 and am currently enrolled in a Master of Arts in Communications program at Marist College (Poughkeepsie, NY) with an expected graduation of August 2012.

When creating a communications campaign for *The Washington Post*, it is apropos to examine the reaction to *The New York Times*' pay plan in case similar attacks arise as the *Post*'s plan is revealed. Scrutiny must be mitigated while adhering to two objectives:

- The effective communication of the details and benefits of the plan to current print subscribers and non-subscribers who currently visit www.washingtonpost.com.
- The reversal of the popular opinion that full, online access to the work of professional journalists and periodicals should remain free.

Concepts from Everett M. Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory will provide direction. Mass communication is the major communication context. By controlling how the media frames the *Post*'s message, interpersonal communication will be manipulated, limiting negative backlash.

With backlash at a minimum, consumers will be more likely to review the *Post's* online pay plan on its merits alone, increasing the likelihood of acceptance and subscriptions.

The ultimate goal of this communications campaign is to not only inform key audiences about the new pay plan and gain subscribers but to create a new paradigm for the benefit of the entire newspaper industry, the result of which will reflect glowingly on *The Washington Post*.

I can be reached at 215-804-7896 or michaelpetitti@me.com. Professional and personal writing samples can be found at www.michaelpetitti.com. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Petitti". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, prominent loop at the end of the last name.

Michael Petitti

Leadership Communication Strategy:

Communicating *The Washington Post's* New Online Pay Plan

Michael Petitti

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Abstract

This Leadership Communication Strategy presents a detailed proposal on how leaders within *The Washington Post* can most effectively communicate the newspaper's new pay plan for unlimited access to its website, www.washingtonpost.com, to key audiences.¹ I will first summarize the problems from a communications perspective and explain why Diffusion of Innovations Theory can aid in solving these issues and developing this campaign. I will delve into the mass and interpersonal communications contexts and provide applicable data. I will describe a research methodology and experiments that will help devise a solution. A detailed plan of action will then be outlined.

¹ This scenario is entirely hypothetical. To date, *The Washington Post* has not instituted an online pay plan, nor is there any indication that one will be implemented.

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Communicating *The Washington Post's* New Online Pay Plan

“Digitized news has defied all predictions. It has produced innovative new forms of information production and distribution. It has demanded new business models, threatened complacency, and responded to innovation” (Scott, 2005, p. 93). More people get their news from the Internet than from newspapers (O’Dell, 2011). Yet most periodicals continue to grant readers free and unlimited online access to the same articles they charge for in print.

This paradigm is shifting. Research released by The Boston Consulting Group nearly two years ago suggested consumers are willing to spend small monthly sums to receive news on their personal computers and mobile devices (Gregoire, 2009, para. 2). As *The Washington Post* prepares to charge for full access to www.washingtonpost.com beginning March 1, 2012, a communications strategy must be in place to ensure problems are addressed and goals achieved. The creator and facilitator of this strategy must be a competent leader with insight into the core issues likely to arise as a pay model for online content is announced and activated. This leader must also understand the key audiences this communications strategy will target as well as the channels through which these audiences will receive messages.

The major problem in implementing this strategy is overcoming the general belief that online news should be free. While some major newspapers currently have online pay plans, such as *The Wall Street Journal*, British newspapers *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, and *The New York Times*, the concept has not yet reached mainstream acceptance. Ironically, the newspaper industry is to blame. “In their enthusiasm not to miss the boat, many news divisions invested in the [online] technology full throttle without properly considering the fiscal risks” (Scott, 2005, p. 94).

At the most basic level, the problem with the business model for online journalism is one of supply and demand. According to Scott (2005), “The exact same content that news outlets sell in print publications has been disseminated so widely by so many producers and aggregators that its value has been driven to zero” (p. 97). Also, apart from a few rare examples, getting Internet users to pay for online content has proven to be extremely challenging (Dou, 2004). Many consumers maintain the belief that online news should remain free, and are “reluctant to pay...because free alternatives [exist] online and offline” (Hsiang, 2005, p. 140).

This Leadership Communication Strategy will offer ways to alter this perception while informing audiences of the details of the *Post's* online pay plan.

Background

Summary of Plan

As of October 2010, circulation of *The Washington Post* was down 6.4% (Bensinger & Pulley, 2010). For the measurement period preceding, circulation was down 13% (Bensinger & Pulley, 2010). Currently, new print-only subscribers living in Washington, D.C. can receive 26 weeks of 7-day delivery of the newspaper for \$1.47 per week and Sunday-only delivery for \$.59 a week (“Subscribe to The Washington Post”). Using the 7-day model, this equates to a fee of \$5.88 per month. Keeping this figure in mind, *Post* leaders developed a pricing scheme for the new pay plan, which includes both print and online subscriptions:

Current subscribers to *The Washington Post's* print edition will face no restrictions when viewing online content. Non-subscribers will be able to read the first three paragraphs of every news story free-of-charge, with a one-time monthly, bi-annual, or yearly fee required to access the remainder of the articles. This fee includes the corresponding print subscription and access to all mobile applications of the newspaper. Certain stories

deemed major and national will continue to be available at no cost to all online visitors after the pay plan is activated. A monthly subscription costs \$9.99; a bi-annual subscription \$49.99; and a yearly subscription \$89.99

Subscribers to the new pay plan will also gain access to a remodeled www.washingtonpost.com. The new website will monitor a user's reading habits to create a unique homepage populated with stories, videos, images and comments exclusive to each subscriber's preferences. This page will be customizable, enabling each subscriber to configure the layout to his or her choosing. Live conversations with columnists, politicians, celebrities, and other luminaries on a range of topics will also be held, among other to-be-announced services. Users seeking the traditional online experience can disable all new features within their settings (Petitti, 2011).²

Central Problems

- Ensuring the plan's details reach key audiences.
- Differentiating the *Post's* online content from other providers.
- Overcoming the notion that online content should remain free.

Communications Theory

The ideal communications theory provides insight into disseminating the details of the *Post's* pay plan while persuading key audiences to adopt the "paying for online news" innovation. Thus, Diffusions of Innovations Theory is especially useful.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory.

Everett M. Rogers presented his basic diffusion model in his 1962 book "Diffusion of Innovations." Four editions followed, the most recent published in 2003. McAnany (1984)

² Again, this scenario is hypothetical. To date, this author has no knowledge of the details of an online pay plan designed for *The Washington Post*.

wrote that the text “has great appeal for decision-makers who must take action rather than speculate on the validity of social theories” (p. 441). Stakeholders within the *Post* fit this description.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory provides a framework on how new ideas (innovations) spread and become adopted by the public (diffusion). “Diffusion is a special type of communication in which the messages are about a new idea. . . . [It] is a kind of *social change*, defined as the process by which alteration occurs in the structure and function of a social system” (Rogers, 2003, p. 6).

The four main elements in diffusion of innovations are the innovation (the *Post*'s online pay plan), communication channels (mass and interpersonal), time, (see the “Timeline” section on pages 14 and 15), and the social system (see the “Audiences Affected” section on pages 12 and 13). Five main steps make up the innovation-decision process, or the process through which an individual passes when encountering an innovation. They are: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation (Rogers, 2003, p. 20). There are also five categories of adopters: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (p. 22).

The remainder of this Leadership Communications Strategy will draw from Rogers' theory to solve the central problems and create an effective campaign.

Communication Contexts Affected by the Problem

Mass communications.

A campaign to educate the public about the *Post*'s new pay plan resides primarily in mass communications venues such as television, print, radio, and the Internet. “Mass media channels are the most rapid and effective means of informing an audience of potential adopters about the existence of an innovation” (Rogers, 2003, p. 18). As such, they are generally more effective in

leading to knowledge effects and can 1) reach a large audience rapidly; 2) spread information; and 3) change weakly held attitudes (p. 205).

The use of well-known individuals, such as authors, politicians, athletes, and actors, to convey the mass communications message may also be effective. The strategic position of VIPs in the markets is very important for diffusion because VIPs make consumers aware of the new product (Delre, Jager, Bijmolt & Janssen, 2010, p. 269). Once the campaign has been launched, mass media professionals will weigh in with opinions. Thus, tracking and managing these responses is a necessary part of this communications strategy.

Interpersonal communications.

Once the details of the plan reach the public, person-to-person communication, or interpersonal communication, will begin. Rogers (2003) wrote, “The heart of the diffusion process consists of *interpersonal* [emphasis added] network exchanges and social modeling by those individuals who have already adopted an innovation to those individuals who are influenced to follow their lead” (p. 35) and that, “Interpersonal channels are more effective in persuading an individual to accept a new idea” (p. 18). Delre et al. (2010) added, “The final penetration of the innovation is substantially lower compared with the situation without social influence” (p. 279). Interpersonal communication also aids in the formation and change of strongly held attitudes.

Related Data

This section will review the details and reaction to *The New York Times*’ pay plan in order to learn what may be worth emulating and prudent to avoid when communicating the details of the *Post*’s plan.

***The New York Times*’ pay plan.**

The New York Times began charging readers for unlimited access to www.nytimes.com on March 28, 2011. The details of the plan are: Home subscribers to the print edition of the *Times* and/or the *International Herald Tribune* (also owned by The New York Times Company) get full access to digital content across all platforms, no limitations, at no extra charge (Petitti, 2011). Non-print subscribers can view 20 free articles every 4 weeks on www.nytimes.com before being asked to subscribe (Outing, 2011). Articles accessed via an inbound link (from a blog, social media website, search result) do not count against the 20, although the *Times* is limiting visits from the search engine Google to five per day (Saba, 2011). When using the *Times*' smartphone or tablet application, "Top News" sections are free but attempting to access anything beyond will be met with a request to pay (Outing).

The first digital subscription package runs \$15 every 4 weeks for full access to the website and smartphone application; the second digital subscription package runs \$20 every 4 weeks for full access to the website and tablet application; and the third digital subscription package runs \$35 every 4 weeks for full access to the website, the smartphone application and the tablet application (Outing, 2011).

Reaction.

Negative reaction to the *Times*' plan can be distilled into three categories: cost structure, classism, and implementation flaws.

Cost structure.

Several media outlets deemed the *Times*' tiered payment plan and fees based on how the newspaper's website is accessed from a mobile device too confusing. Nick Summers (2011) of The Daily Beast wrote, "Nine days after the *Times*' pay meter went into effect in the United States, there are questions—lots of them—about how the model works" and "There is confusion

about how much the pay meter costs.”

Classism.

From the *The Smith College Sophian*:

The New York Times has never been known for speaking to the common man, yet the recent changes smack of pretentiousness and classism. If the newspaper has gone this long with charging no subscriptions for online access, they should be able to afford a cheaper, app-free price that will both allow them to make profit, and allow many more readers to be able to subscribe to the paper (Johnson, 2011).

Implementation flaws.

Circumvention.

Since the *Times*' method allows for unlimited visits to its online content via inbound links, readers seeking to circumvent the “paywall” – the name many media outlets have given to online barriers that separate paid from free content – can simply use a search engine to discover *Times*' content and reach its website through these measures indefinitely (Petitti, 2011).

Cookie-removal.

The *Times* can only count individual visits to its website through cookies, or text stored on a user's computer by his or her web browser that record information about that user's online history (Petitti, 2011). To avoid this, a user can turn off the cookies option within the settings of his or her web browser.

Findings and Suggestions

The *Times* reported that it in less than a month since the pay plan went active it had “signed up more than 100,000 subscribers” (Peters, 2011, para. 4) and that “early signs indicated that readers were responding well” (para. 4). The chief executive of the Times Company, Janet

L. Robinson, also reported “an increase in subscriptions to the print edition, which... was a result of print subscribers receiving free digital access” (para. 6). Finally, the *Times* reported a 4.5% increase in digital advertising for the first quarter of 2011 (para. 9).

The *Post* has already addressed some of the pitfalls of the *Times*’ plan through the pricing structure and accessibility of its own online pay plan, recognizing the need for lower fees and granting subscribers full access to the website on all mobile devices. The *Post* can also gain perspective from examining other industries that currently charge for content that was once available for free. “When Napster and similar file sharing services debuted about a decade ago, people said the music industry was dead because consumers would no longer pay for sounds. Then Steve Jobs and iTunes arrived, and the music industry was reborn” (Lazarus, 2009, para. 21). Pay-per-use for online content may still be relatively uncommon, but its entry into the mainstream now seems closer given the successful implementation of micropayments for music and games (Herbert & Thurman, 2007). With its new online pay plan, the *Post* can likewise spur the rebirth of the newspaper industry. iTunes and Microsoft’s Xbox Live have demonstrated that if a fair price is charged for online content, consumers will respond favorably (Lazarus, 2009; Herbert & Thurman, 2007).

The key is to communicate the plan not only as an upgraded service for those seeking the *Post*’s unique content but also as an innovation that signals the beginning of a new era for online news. At the same time, care must be taken to acknowledge the lessons taught by the *Times*’ foray. The following hypotheses incorporate the identified central problems with what was learned through the above data and the aims of this communications campaign.

- H₁: Controlling how the *Post*’s message is framed in mass communications will affect interpersonal communication, limiting negative backlash.

- H₂: With backlash at a minimum, consumers will view the *Post's* new pay plan on its merits alone, increasing the likelihood of acceptance and subscriptions.
- H₃: As acceptance for the plan increases, a paradigm shift will occur and the plan will be viewed as an innovation that ushers in a new business model for online news.

Research

Audiences Affected

As the details of the *Post's* online pay plan begin to diffuse, two particular audiences will be immediately affected: current print subscribers and non-subscribers who frequently visit www.washingtonpost.com.

Current print subscribers.

About 1.4 million of the 4.7 million adult residents of Washington, D.C. subscribe to *The Washington Post* ("The Washington Post's Readership"). Of these 1.4 million, 38% have a household income of \$100,000 or more ("The Washington Post's Readership"). In 2007, within the District of Columbia, 45 newspaper publishers were in operation, with the *Post* having the highest print subscriber rate ("U.S. Census Bureau"). Millions more subscribe to the *Post* outside the borders of Washington, D.C.

Non-subscribers, frequent website visitors.

The Washington Post already tracks the number of visitors to www.washingtonpost.com each day. In the newsroom, a television screen displays the number of unique visitors to the website and how many articles those visitors viewed and where those visitors came from, among other data (Peters, 2010, para. 7). Each data point is color-coded, indicating whether the website's goal for the month has been met on 46 different metrics (para. 7). As of December

2008, 9.5 million unique visitors were visiting www.washingtonpost.com each month (“Neilson Online”).

Qualitative Research

Qualitative data are in the form of text, written words, phrases, or symbols describing or representing people, actions, and events in social life (Neuman, 2006, p. 457). In terms of studying how innovations diffuse, “quantitative empirical research is rare” (Westlund, 2008, p. 446). It makes sense, then, to perform qualitative research in this particular campaign.

Methods of Research

Surveys.

The survey is the customary research methodology used by most diffusion strategists. Adopters of an innovation are asked when they adopted, where or from whom they obtained information about the innovation, and the consequences of the adoption (Rogers, 2003, p. 33).

In the case of the *Post*, pre- and post-campaign surveys of a percentage of current subscribers will consist of questions that seek to solve the aforementioned central problems. Generally, these questions will address: 1) the extent of current subscribers’ knowledge of the pay plan, if any, and where they received this information; 2) the aspects of the *Post* that set it apart from other periodicals; and 3) current subscribers’ opinions on newspapers charging for access to online content and the future of the industry.

Focus groups.

The focus group is a special qualitative research technique in which people are informally “interviewed” in a group-discussion setting (Neuman, 2006, p. 412). For the sake of this strategy, the focus group study will take place mid-campaign and involve questions on participants’ thoughts on the campaign and pay plan to date. A short, stand-up extemporaneous presentation

on the plan's details will proceed the focus group discussion to give participants a frame of reference and researchers the ability to "make adjustments based on the audience's response" (Barrett, 2011, p. 159). Focus groups have an advantage over surveys in that participants "tend to feel empowered" and "may query one another and explain their answers to others" (p. 412), which provides insight into how interpersonal communications could aid in this campaign.

Rate of adoption.

The rate of adoption is generally measured as the number of individuals who adopt a new idea in a specified period. Rogers (2003) wrote, "Most of the variance in the rate of adoption of innovations...is explained by five attributes: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability" (p. 221). These five attributes will also be tested in post-campaign survey and discussed within the focus groups.

Timeline

The below timeline accounts for the first year of this communications campaign. Its degree of success will determine the direction of the strategy after the first year.

- August 1, 2011: Distribute news release announcing pay plan.
- September 1-15, 2011: Conduct surveys.
- September 16-30, 2011: Review survey results.
- October 1-15, 2011: Incorporate data from surveys into strategy.
- October 16-November 30, 2011: Produce mass communications materials.
- December 1, 2011: Launch mass communications campaign.
- December 15-22, 2011: Content analysis of mass media coverage of plan details and discussion on rebuttals, if necessary.
- January 3-14, 2012: Development and issuance of rebuttals, if necessary.

- January 15-February 28, 2012: Continuance of current mass communications campaign.
- February 1-28, 2012: Development of special “launch” campaign that includes information on special free trial period.
- March 1-15, 2012: Pay plan launches, “launch” message disseminated.
- March 1-April 1, 2012: Free trial period.
- March 1-June 1, 2012: Monitor number of subscribers and website traffic.
- March 15-March 30, 2012: Develop email to free trial users offering discounted rate for first three months of service.
- March 15, 2012-May 1, 2013: Continuance of mass communications campaign.
- April 2, 2012: Email sent to free trial users.
- May 1-15, 2012: Focus group studies performed.
- May 16-June 15, 2012: Analyze data from focus groups, alter campaign if necessary.
- September 1-3, 2012: Measure rate of adoption and extrapolate for next six months.
- September 15-November 15, 2012: Identify opinion leaders, spur interpersonal communication.
- April 1-June 1, 2013: Review current communications campaign, reframe if necessary going into second year of plan.

Plan of Action

Depending upon the results of the research methods, an appropriate campaign can be crafted. No matter the results, however, this plan will follow the communications strategy framework, where consideration will be given to each of the appropriate components: the purpose, messages, media/forum, timing, and communicator (Barrett, 2011, p. 39).

Leadership

“Opinion leadership is the degree to which an individual is able to influence other individuals’ attitudes or overt behavior informally in a desired way with relative frequency” (Rogers, 2003, p. 27). Opinion leaders serve as a model for the innovation behavior of their followers. In this regard, they are like authoritarian leaders, a group who “emphasize they are in charge, exerting influence...over group members” (Northouse, 2012, p. 53). Thus, it is essential that the *Post* identify these individuals through surveys and, later, focus groups. Once identified, targeted messages can be developed to reach this demographic and persuade them to register for the free trial period, the goal being that they enjoy the service and spread the word.

Goals

- *The Washington Post* seeks to educate key audiences about the details of the pay plan.
- *The Washington Post* seeks to present its content as unique and appealing.
- *The Washington Post* seeks to create a new paradigm where charging for online news is viewed as a natural step in the evolution of the newspaper industry.

Strategic Messages

Barrett (2010) wrote, “When developing external messages, an organization’s leaders need to spend time to ensure that all messages are honest, clear, consistent, and meaningful” (p. 388). Leaders within *The Washington Post* must be aware that “a lack of respect a company shows for its customers may suggest a lack of respect for its investors and its employees and a fundamentally flawed ethical core” (p. 396).

As this communications strategy launches, the initial focus will be on the key audiences mentioned above.

Current print subscribers.

Strategic message 1.

Current subscribers will receive automatic enrollment in the online plan for their current print subscription fee. This will essentially make them early adopters without requiring any innovation acceptance on their part. They will also gain access to all the new personalization features on www.washingtonpost.com. “Personalization services are customization services. They are designed to sell” (Scott, 2005, p. 108). Therefore, a strategic message for this group is: Your *Post*, improved.

Strategic message 2.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory prioritizes interpersonal communications for aiding in the “persuasion” step of the innovation-decision process. The *Post* wants current subscribers to act as pitchmen, telling their friends and neighbors about the benefits of the service. To encourage this interpersonal communication, current subscribers will receive a discount on their subscription fee if a new subscriber lists them as a referral. The strategic message is: Share your *Post*, Save On Your *Post*.

Non-subscribers, frequent website visitors.

Strategic message 1.

Of the five categories of adopters listed above, early adopters are those most likely to subscribe to the pay plan as it comes on line. This demographic is mostly comprised of men, 15 to 49 years old, who are rather well educated and have a great interest in technology. They are most likely to use some form of subscription model...and are oriented toward online newspapers (Westlund, 2008, p. 459). Messages will target markets proven to reach the above demographic.

Strategic message 2.

Since “users’ subjective image of online news as a whole is based primarily on which of its attributes they have used and appreciated” (Nguyen, 2008, p. 9) and “the overall use of the

Internet as a news medium is the summation of individual feature uses” (p. 15), a free trial will be promoted prominently on the homepage of www.washingtonpost.com to entice frequent visitors to register.

Communication Tactics

- “Chat rooms, discussion forums, and the e-mail addresses of journalists are offered up as the transformative element of digital news” (Scott, 2005, p. 120). As such, an open forum on www.washingtonpost.com will be created where users and non-users of the new service can share their thoughts. A leader within the *Post* will moderate the forum and respond to feedback.
- “Individuals depend on their near peers for innovation evaluation information, which decreases their uncertainty about the innovation’s expected consequences” (Rogers, 2003, p. 203). Today, much peer-to-peer communication takes place through social media channels. Therefore, a Facebook page and Twitter account will both be created under the name “*Post* Evolution.” This name will help reach the third overarching goal: creating a new paradigm where charging for online news is viewed as a natural step in the evolution of the newspaper industry.

Evaluation Method

Broom (2009) noted, “All best-practice approaches recommend conducting evaluation in three stages: (1) preparation/inputs, (2) implementation/outputs, and (3) impact/outcomes/effects” (p. 357).

Preparation evaluation.

Pre-tests will be conducted on the content of all external messages to ensure all are “honest, clear, consistent, and meaningful” (Barrett, 2011, p. 385).

Implementation evaluation.

Ongoing content analysis of media coverage, including examination of audience reach, placement, prominence, share of voice, issues reported, message, and visuals (Broom, 2009), will be performed, with adjustments made if necessary.

Impact evaluation.

Summative research will be performed to determine the extent to which the central problems were overcome and the goals were achieved.

Conclusion

To effectively communicate the details of its new online pay plan, *The Washington Post* must do more than disseminate pertinent information. The newspaper must also change the generally held perception that online content should be free. This requires a dynamic communication strategy overseen by an able leader. This paper puts forth such a strategy. Its benefits include clear recognition of the central problems facing the *Post*, hypotheses on how to overcome these problems, and goals supported by detailed action plans. “Trends in the [newspaper] industry make it clear that the days of totally free web content are rapidly coming to a close” (Scott, 2005, p. 106). Using this strategy will help speed this transition, in turn benefiting the *Post*.

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