

Starbucks Corporate Culture

By John Moore

Starbucks Coffee has redefined modern marketing by forsaking the traditional marketing trappings of mass advertising and, instead, focusing on building endearing and enduring relationships with customers one cup, one store, at a time.

Starbucks tribal knowledge is an innate language that has never been written, only spoken, and then, only within the Starbucks tribe.

However, for a company that has accomplished so much, it's surprising how little the business world really knows how Starbucks found prosperity from selling a commodity. That's because much of this company's sage advice and weathered truths exist solely in the hearts and minds of long-time Starbucks partners (employees).

Starbucks tribal knowledge is an innate language that has never been written, only spoken, and then, only within the Starbucks tribe. It's a pithy quote by a respected Starbucks executive. It's a mantra used by Starbucks project teams to bring forth passionate followership. It's emotionally intense advice from old-school partners that pierces the souls of new-school partners. It's poignant. It's thought-provoking. It's actionable. It's what built Starbucks the business and Starbucks the brand.

It's now time for those outside the Starbucks tribe to have access to this insider knowledge.

The tribal knowledge shared in this manifesto is an abridged collection of those nuggets of tribal wisdom—a written compendium of the truths that, added together, express the learnings and traditions of Starbucks.



As a former, long-time Starbucks marketer, it is my hope more businesses base their future growth on the endearing and enduring principles the Starbucks business was built upon. With that said, allow this collection of tribal knowledge from Starbucks to course through the veins of your company's culture much like a shot of espresso invigoratingly courses through the veins of your body.

Building the Business Creates the Brand

Contrary to what you may have heard or thought, Starbucks never sought to create a brand. Instead, the company passionately sought to create appreciation for a better tasting cup of coffee.

It was, in fact, as basic as that.

The unconscious process of forming its brand came out of unrelenting passion, not unending spin. Starbucks was too busy sourcing and roasting the highest-quality coffee beans to think about branding. Starbucks was too busy educating customers on how and why they should appreciate a stronger, bolder, more flavorful cup of coffee to think about branding. Starbucks was too busy creating a comforting and welcoming place for people to exhale than to think about branding.

Starbucks' mission was to change the way people drank and appreciated coffee, and it did this by educating customers about its product with enthusiasm. When the company began, coffee was seen only as a hot, brown liquid that was consumed out of habit and a need for caffeine. Starbucks knew that the coffee experience could be—and should be—much more than that. When done right, the subtle, rich, exotic flavors of coffee, served in a cozy, relaxing environment could lead to the kind of "rewarding everyday moments" that were missing from the American retail landscape.

Managing a brand is a lifetime of work. Brands are fragile. You have to recognize the success of Starbucks, or any company or brand, is not an entitlement. It has to be earned every day.

—Howard Schultz Starbucks chairman and visionary ("Mr. Coffee," Context, August/ September 2001, p. 22)

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Because Starbucks was busy working on and working in the business, it built a business of which the by-product was the creation of a strong brand.

Starbucks teaches us that rarely, if ever, can you sprinkle magical branding dust to create an endearing and enduring brand from scratch. But that doesn't stop companies from trying. Instead of spending money to improve the performance of a product or enhance the customer's experience, many companies will attempt to build a brand by throwing money into multimillion–dollar image campaigns. The focus moves away from adherence to product devotion to the appearance of product devotion.

A business can't sustain itself on image, no matter how much money is dumped into sporadic, heavy-up advertising campaigns. Companies that put their money behind their brand and not their business fail to realize that the business is the brand. And to realize the full potential of the brand, one must work on and work in the business every day of every year.

You cannot create a brand before you create a business—the process is simultaneous. As you build your business, you create your brand.

Creating Category Intrigue Builds Brand Intrigue.

Starbucks did not create the specialty coffee category in the United States. But by 1996 Starbucks clearly emerged as the leading specialty coffee retailer. And it established this leadership position not by creating interest in the Starbucks brand, but rather by creating intrigue with the specialty coffee category.

It sounds counterintuitive to promote the category before the brand but, as marketing consultants Al and Laura Ries point out in *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*, "Customers don't care about new brands, they care about new categories." Customers looking to be part of the "new best thing" are looking for a totally new experience, not just a new product. In the '80s and early '90s the specialty coffee category was just that—totally new. But for customers to be attracted to the new experience, they had to know about it; for customers to appreciate the category's leading brand, they first had to appreciate the category. Without widespread consumer acceptance of the specialty coffee category, there would be no Starbucks brand to promote.

We can laugh now, but fifteen years ago the specialty coffee category was virtually unknown beyond a few coffee connoisseurs. Most of us had never sipped a cappuccino (much less pronounced it) or savored the rich, bold flavor of a single-origin coffee like Sumatra. Most of us drank canned coffee and we liked it (okay, at least we tolerated it).

Before Starbucks could get customers to appreciate and admire its unique brand of coffee, it had to educate them to first appreciate and admire the specialty coffee category. So Starbucks set forth on its mission to educate customers on what the specialty coffee category is, what specialty coffee does, and what specialty coffee aspires to be.

Starbucks promoted what the specialty coffee category is through teaching customers the appreciable differences between canned coffee and specialty coffee. The defining difference, shown especially in early marketing materials and employee training tools, is in the bean itself. Starbucks coffee uses only 100 percent high-quality arabica beans, while canned coffee uses inferior, lower-quality robusta beans.

Starbucks promoted what specialty coffee does by having customers taste the difference through sampling. One sip of a freshly brewed cup of Arabian Mocha Sanani and customers immediately knew that this coffee was different from what they drank out of a can—this was coffee they actually liked. And after sipping the slightly sweet, roasted nuttiness from a handcrafted caffé latte, customers knew this was something they wanted to experience again and again.

By promoting the category and creating customer preference for higher-quality, better-tasting coffee, Starbucks became the recognized category leader.

Starbucks showed its customers that coffee could be good, downright enjoyable. It promoted that specialty coffee aspires to be the uncommonly good "everyday coffee." Yes, its cappuccinos and lattes could be viewed as occasional treats, but it is the dark-roasted brew—the "regular" coffee—that could and should kick-start any morning and cap off any evening.

Starbucks shared its pride in its product with customers willing to learn about the specialty coffee category. By promoting the category and creating customer preference for higher-quality, better-tasting coffee, Starbucks became the recognized category leader. After all, a business is not defined by its brand, it's defined by the "category" company it keeps.

Be the Best, Not the Biggest.

Jim Donald, current Starbucks CEO, and Howard Schultz were chatting just before going onstage at the 2004 Starbucks shareholders meeting when Howard remarked to Jim that he couldn't believe Starbucks was about to open its nine-thousandth location. Jim replied by saying, "Howard, we haven't opened nine thousand locations. We've opened one store, nine thousand times."

It's obvious that Starbucks has been built for growth, but what's not obvious is that Starbucks still acts as if it is growing one store at a time. What is hopefully clear is that Starbucks still maintains its small-company values. When people think of big business, they tend to think of faceless corporations driven by greed and dishonesty who care more about profiting off people than they do about making people's lives more rewarding. But you can't be self-serving while professing to serve your customers.

Just as it never sought to create a brand, Starbucks never set its priority to become the biggest coffee retailer.



That's why focusing on being the biggest, as opposed to being the best, undercuts your company's values. Once a company puts its needs—faster growth, increased market share, bigger profits—ahead of its customers, it loses its soul. And it can happen in subtle ways, without anyone even noticing.

Starbucks is determined to be everywhere its customers expect it to be.

In 1996 Starbucks opened its one-thousandth location, more than doubling its number of stores from just two years before in 1994. The exuberance of opening new stores in new cities became contagious for everyone working inside Starbucks. A mantra, "2,000 by 2,000," meant to focus the company's mental energy on store growth, began to spread throughout the company, starting first in the corporate boardrooms and spreading deep into backrooms of stores. The objective of the "2,000 by 2,000" mantra was to have Starbucks open 2,000 locations by the turn of the millennium. Although it was a catchy phrase, and Starbucks' growth was related to its mission, it wasn't where the focus ought to have been. Fortunately, because the ingrained culture of Starbucks is so quality-obsessed (and because the goal of 2,000 stores was reached early in 1999), it wasn't difficult to redirect the Starbucks ship back to true north, focusing on making a great cup of coffee and delivering unparalleled experiences to each and every customer.

Just as it never sought to create a brand, Starbucks never set its priority to become the biggest coffee retailer. Starbucks did, however, set out to become the best coffee retailer, trusting that growth would be a by-product of being the best. If the overriding goal had been to be the biggest, Starbucks would have made compromises galore on its quality that it has always been unwilling to make. Growth was and is encouraged, and made possible, by wanting to meet the desires of customers more than wanting to meet sales or profit projections. As Starbucks gains new customers, it wants access to more stores in more convenient places—on the way to the metro train in the morning, near the office after lunch, next to the dry cleaners, just off the Interstate. And Starbucks is determined to be everywhere its customers expect it to be.

The company believes everyone deserves great coffee. And it is this unrelenting desire to share the best coffee with everyone that has truly fueled Starbucks' unparalleled growth.

Starbucks' steadfast drive to become the best coffee retailer has resulted in its being the biggest coffee retailer. It can often work out that way...but it never seems to work in the reverse.

Actions Speak Louder Than Advertising.

Excessive marketing spending will only accelerate the demise of any poorly conceived company.

—Scott Bedbury (A New Brand World: 8 Principles for Achieving Brand Leadership in the 21st Century) For many marketers, the answer to the question of, "Sales are down, what should we do?" is to spend marketing dollars on creating an advertising campaign. Not at Starbucks.

During the ten years from 1987 to 1997, Starbucks spent less than \$10 million on advertising—for a publicly traded retailer the size of Starbucks, that kind of miniscule advertising expenditure is almost unheard of, especially for a growing brand. Keep in mind, in 2004, the company spent nearly \$70 million on the recruiting and training of store partners—that's more money than Starbucks spent on advertising that year.

When Starbucks was young and developing, it eschewed advertising more as a matter of not being able to afford it than anything else. But as Starbucks grew, building its business and its brand in concert, it realized something significant: Word-of-mouth was the best advertising

The bottom line is this: You still have to be remarkable if you want to get remarked about.

any company could ever hope to receive. And, despite the fact that many marketers are now figuring out ways to "buy" this kind of buzz from consumers, the most effective word-ofmouth advertising still can't be bought. Even if you're telling your story, and not making it up, your advertising efforts will increasingly meet skepticism in a marketplace saturated with competing and boisterous advertising messages.

The bottom line is this: You still have to be remarkable if you want to get remarked about.

Marketers face a brave new world of satisfying consumer wants, not needs. And, increasingly, advertising has less of an impact on people's consciousness than it used to. The louder and more frequent the messages become, the more people tune them out.

The Starbucks marketing department practices an agnostic attitude about advertising more than an atheistic attitude. That is, it's not impossible that Starbucks would never, under any circumstances, believe in advertising. It's just that the company has its doubts, and it is not willing to commit to having faith in advertising to make sales happen.

Marketing at Starbucks is more a case of doing and being rather than saying. Starbucks would rather do what they do and be who they are and not succumb to using traditional advertising to say what they do and say who they are. Instead, Starbucks would rather spend marketing dollars to make the customer experience better and not to make the advertising better.

Starbucks spends its marketing dollars to make the customer experience better by:

- adding more unique beverages to its menu;
- adding wireless internet (wi-fi) and music listening/CD-burning kiosks to the coffee experience;
- adding more comfy couches and more reading tables in its stores; and
- adding more partners on staff to increase speed of service to customers.

All of the business activities mentioned above are considered marketing activities to Starbucks because a customer's experience is "the marketing" for Starbucks.

Customers have told Starbucks its image of authenticity and integrity has been enhanced by its limited use of traditional advertising. Many Starbucks customers hold the belief that traditional advertising shouldn't be trusted, that it is an unnecessary marketing activity for Starbucks to engage in.

For Starbucks, action, not advertising, is the most effective way to drive sales and build a brand.

Needs Are Rational. Wants Are Aspirational.

"My highest aim is to have the entire Starbucks experience provide human connection and personal enrichment in cherished moments, around the world, one cup at a time."

—Howard Schultz (internal Starbucks presentation, Seattle)

Everyone aspires to live a certain lifestyle, but most times they settle for living a life below their aspirations. Starbucks understands that an aspirational gap exists between the lifestyle most consumers aspire to live and the actual lifestyle they do live. Knowing this, Starbucks strives to help people actualize their aspirations of having human connection and personal enrichment.

By tapping into people's wants and offering them a way to actualize their aspirations, businesses can transcend the commoditization trap. Successful businesses find ways to close the aspirational gap by fulfilling consumer wants, not needs. The discount chain, Target, with its "expect more, pay less" business mindset typifies this principle beautifully. Target satisfies its customers' needs of affordability while fulfilling their aspirations to have fashionable clothes and stylish décor. Target has tapped into its customers' beliefs that style doesn't have to come at a high price and, in turn, has acquired a mass of loyal customers for it.

However, most businesses resort to only fulfilling consumers' needs and not their wants. Marketers at these businesses will typically develop products and programs to strictly solve for a particular consumer need-state. For instance, creating and launching a new drink to fulfill a consumer's thirst-quenching need. Or a new flavor-line extension of a commonplace product to fulfill a consumer's need for a different yet similar taste appeal.

Needs are basic. Needs are rational. Needs are boring. Needs have been commoditized. Every unremarkable business seems to be in the needs-fulfilling business.

Wants are emotional. Wants are aspirational. Wants are thrilling. Wants are where the profits are. Only truly remarkable businesses are in the business of satisfying customer wants by helping customers actualize their aspirations. These companies give their customers the feeling that no expense was spared. Whether they are selling luxury cars, gourmet meals, or \$4 cups of coffee, businesses that fulfill their customers' wants help their customers to live the life of their dreams.

Despite Starbucks being so convenient—it's opening new stores at a rate of five a day somewhere in the world—people still place a high value on it, and that value is all about "wants." No one needs a Caramel Macchiato from Starbucks. No one needs a Starbucks Cinnamon Dolce Frappuccino[®] blended beverage. And no one needs to spend time reading a newspaper in one of Starbucks' comfy chairs. No one needs the extras in life, but Starbucks knows that the extras are what its customers crave and deserve. By serving them great coffee, personalizing their experience, giving them a chance to take a break from fulfilling the real needs in their lives, Starbucks offers its customers a pampered moment. With this feeling of privilege comes the closing of the aspirational gap. For the few seconds the customer is transported during that first sip or the minutes spent relaxing in an overstuffed chair, aspirations have been reached (even if it is merely a fleeting feeling). This is the feeling, the want, that keeps customers coming back.

Practice Local Warming

Starbucks may be global in scope, but it strives to be local in function through being a good neighbor in the communities it serves. At Starbucks, being a good neighbor means actively participating in locally relevant community and charitable events. It's how Starbucks practices local warming while also practicing global growing.

To this day, as has been for many years, new Starbucks stores open in cities around the world with pre-opening charity events benefiting local nonprofits. Stores make daily donations of unsold pastries and past-date coffee to local charities. Every store functions as a local community gathering spot, whether the store is situated in an urban downtown setting, out in the suburbs, or in a rural town. Plus, Starbucks and its customers have donated upwards of five-million books and toys to hundreds of local charities through store-driven and company-driven charity drives.

However, most companies struggle to make a business case for community involvement. Measuring the business impact of participating in locally relevant community and charity events beyond a feel-good measurement is just not enough. Thus, they choose not to make community involvement a business priority.

Starbucks makes the business case for community participation by quantifying its impact in five ways:

- **1.** It increases employee morale, work performance, and attendance. Starbucks has learned when its store-level baristas actively participate in local community events, they feel better about themselves, and that, in turn makes them more enthusiastic employees for the company.
- **2.** It increases employee retention rates. Starbucks has noticed there is a correlation between store-level turnover rates and employee community participation. The more a barista volunteers in the community as a Starbucks employee, the longer the barista stays with the company.
- **3.** It increases employees' leadership skills. Because Starbucks is a growing company opening up multiple stores a day, it needs new leaders to emerge in order to manage those stores. When store-level employees actively volunteer their time to charitable causes, they gain valuable leadership skills, making them more qualified to fill store management positions.
- **4. It enhances the company's reputation.** Community involvement improves the company's reputation as a caring, credible, and integral part of the neighborhood. By giving back and investing in the local neighborhood, companies attract good local customers—people who care about their communities—as well as the most talented and conscientious employees. Over time, a good company reputation will build trust among the public, who will be much more likely to give the company the benefit of the doubt during tough times, controversies, or scandals.
- **5.** It improves a publicly traded company's stock performance and attracts investors. Companies with strong reputations for social responsibility enjoy an elite status among investors. According to Ronald Alsop in his book, *18 Immutable Laws of Corporate Reputation,* investors are willing to pay more for stocks of companies that have good reputations and, therefore, less perceived risk.

Though Starbucks is a major global player, it's the community connections that are keeping it in play. Local warming positively impacts the global performance of employees and the bottom line—both of which make for the best experiences possible for the customers.

Be Generous.

"Give, and you shall receive." It's an old and overused proverb. And for good reason...it works. The more kindness we give others, the more kindness we receive. The more knowledge we share with others, the more knowledge we personally receive in return. The more generous we are, the more generously we profit.

This principle of generosity applies directly to Starbucks. In fact, it can be argued the Starbucks business was built on sampling generously.

To succeed, Starbucks had to change the worldview of the masses that only imagined coffee to be a hot, brown, tasteless, yet caffeinated liquid. In order to change this worldview, Starbucks had to dramatically and demonstratively alter people's understanding of what coffee should taste like, a task made even more challenging because a cup of brewed Starbucks coffee is much stronger, bolder, and more intensely flavorful than the common cup of coffee.

Starbucks accomplished this seismic worldview shift through sampling generously. For Starbucks, tasting is believing. Back when Starbucks was a small company acting big, sampling of coffees and espresso drinks was nearly omnipresent throughout the day. When you visited a Starbucks, chances were, there would be a taster-cup sample of a just-made drink ready for the tasting. Sampling became ingrained as part of the Starbucks business culture as the more customers tasted, the more they believed that coffee should taste just like that.

Tasting is more than believing at Starbucks, it's also sales-driving. Internal company studies have revealed for every five beverages Starbucks samples to customers, it triggers a purchase (an impressive 20-percent-conversion rate).

When Starbucks launches a new beverage, the most effective sales-driving tool is not advertising it on the radio, it's sampling it directly to customers.

Successful companies such as Whole Foods, Great Harvest Bread Company, and Trader Joe's also use generous sampling of their products to drive sales. But doing this does more than drive sales on specific products—it's a long-term strategy for converting customers into loyal followers.

Everybody loves getting stuff for free. But this sampling notion goes beyond the simple concept of giving customers a little something for nothing. Sampling should be and, at Starbucks, is an act of pride and not simply a device to increase sales. Because sampling solely to sell is devoid of genuine pride in a product or service, customers sense this and will shy away from the shill. Sampling to share personifies your appreciation and pride in your product, which customers also understand and will become more enthusiastic and eager to buy.

Giving away free samples powerfully demonstrates to consumers the pride you have in your products. This pride breeds trust—there's nothing underhanded or suspect about it. Your customers are smart enough to realize you're offering them food and drink samples because you hope they'll love it. They're hoping to find that great product that fulfills their desire. By giving it away, you're showing customers how sure you are they'll love it and want it again and again.

When Starbucks samples, it's telling its customers, "Hey, we're not just going to tell you how great our new beverage is (that would be out-right advertising), we're going to prove it to you. Try it yourself, on us."

To drive sales and transform customers into devoted followers, follow the "sample example" not the advertising example, show the pride you have in your product, share it, and be generous.

Hire Passion Over Experience

"It is better to hire people who can get you to where you want to be than people who profess to have been there before." That's brilliant advice from Guy Kawasaki, an old school Apple employee, as written in his book, The Macintosh Way. It is also highlights the Starbucks way to hiring right.

Starbucks places more importance on hiring people who have a mix of verve, candor, can-do spirit, and a highly likeable personality than they do on people who have teems of experience.

Starbucks has learned experienced people find ways to say "no, it can't be done" more easily because they've invariably tried (and failed at) something similar in a different workplace. While passionate people, operating under refreshing naiveté, will find ways to say "yes" and not be inhibited by the ripples of past failures.

At Starbucks, it's simple: The right people to hire have more passion than they do experience.

Abhor Complacency. Resist Conservatism. Fight Conceit.

With supreme market dominance, and not a real competitive threat in sight, one would think Starbucks could ease up a little on its frantic pace. Starbucks has essentially cornered the market on all things coffee and momentum alone should allow them to reach their stated goal of at least 30,000 locations world-wide.

But the cultural mindset of Starbucks is one that believes that at anytime this could all come crashing down. Starbucks insiders maintain a feeling the marketplace may suddenly turn from loving lattes to exiling espresso.

In many ways, Starbucks still behaves like the upstart coffee company it was. They've managed to keep the upstart mentality alive by not succumbing to The Three Cs of Complacency, Conservatism, and Conceit. These "Three Cs" have derailed many a successful, growing business.

Complacency is self-satisfied contentment with the status quo. It's doing nothing new so as not to disrupt the supposedly good thing going on.

Businesses that stop taking risks have become conservative in their decision-making. When a company becomes conservative, it makes decisions based on maintaining what they have and not growing what they have.

Conceit causes businesses to make decisions based more upon internal business needs and less upon external/end user customer needs.

Starbucks could have easily become complacent, conservative, and conceited. But so far, the company has resisted.

A complacent Starbucks would never have launched Frappuccino[®] blended beverages in 1995. Instead, it would have been satisfied with merely offering iced versions of its hot lattes. Without Frappuccino blended beverages on its menu, Starbucks would be a much smaller business today as the Frappuccino category comprises up to 20 percent of a store's total yearly sales.

A conservative Starbucks would never have become involved in the music business through its Hear Music label. Sure, customers liked the music playing in-store but expecting them to buy CDs at a coffee shop was a risk. A risk which is paying off handsomely as Starbucks is gaining sales and credibility as a music retailer.

A conceited Starbucks would never have responded to demands of activist groups by offering hormone-free milk and Fair-Trade coffee. The customer demand for hormone-free milk and Fair Trade coffee is small, but Starbucks understands the importance of doing the right things right. And the right thing means giving customers the choice of more socially-responsible milk and farmer-friendly coffee offerings.

Starbucks tribal knowledge tells us not to be afraid to take risks, to think big, and by all means to stay humble no matter the level of success your business achieves.

Everything Matters.

"We had a mission, to educate consumers everywhere about fine coffee. We had a vision, to create an atmosphere in our stores that drew people in and gave them a sense of wonder and romance in the midst of their harried lives. We had an idealistic dream, that our company could be far more than the paradigm defined by corporate America in the past."

—Howard Schultz (Pour Your Heart Into It)

Starbucks is an experiential brand that strives to be interesting in order to get customers interested. Because the customer experience at Starbucks is the marketing for Starbucks, everything matters.

Not just one thing...E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G.

Everything matters because everything is an act of communication with customers. And, E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G includes the following:

The package design of whole bean coffees matters.

The hours of operation signs on the front door matters.

The way the chocolate-covered espresso beans are merchandised on the shelves matters.

The music playing in-store matters.

The way baristas dress matters.

The way your espresso drink is prepared and delivered matters.

The promotional sign placed at the main cash register matters.

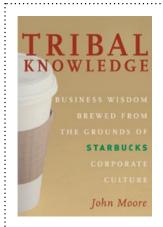
The lighting in the restrooms matters.

E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G to Starbucks matters.

You'd be hard pressed to find a Starbucks employee say, "That doesn't matter. No customer will ever notice it." Because chances are a customer will notice. And that's why EVERYTHING MATTERS to Starbucks.



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For more details or to buy a copy of John Moore's, Tribal Knowledge: **Business Wisdom** Brewed from the Grounds of Starbucks Corporate Culture click here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For the past decade, John Moore has made his mark in the marketing world by creating, championing, and implementing marketing ideas and branding ideals for Whole Foods Market and Starbucks Coffee. Today, through his Brand Autopsy Marketing Practice, John shares business and marketing advice with small-to-midsize companies aspiring to become the next Whole Foods or Starbucks.

He has been recognized by Fast Company magazine as a "leading practitioner of the arts of customer service and marketing" and serves as a Standards Council Advisory Board Member with the Word of Mouth Marketing Association. John is a frequent speaker at conferences, companies, and conferences, and he writes the popular marketing blog, Brand Autopsy. http://brandautopsy.typepad.com/

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