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Logo Logic: The Ups and Downs of Branded Political Communication

By
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and
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Activists often have difficulties getting messages to larger publics. This is particularly challenging in the U.S. press/politics system, where the mainstream media tend to open the news gates only after government institutions engage with issues. Yet there are signs in recent years that activists are finding creative ways of publicizing their causes by attaching political messages to familiar corporate brands. For example, complex messages about labor conditions in foreign factories making shoes and apparel may travel more easily when attached to a major brand, for example, Nike sweatshop. The first part of this analysis examines how branded political communication works and how it may be effective. The second part looks at possible downsides of getting consumer audiences to actually grasp the larger import of the politics behind the brands and getting targeted companies and industrial sectors (fashion, food, forest products, etc.) to change their offending behaviors.

Keywords: political communication; logo campaigns; consumer politics; product certification; culture jamming; corporate social responsibility

Activists have long lamented the difficulties of getting their messages to larger publics. The broad distribution of activist messages can be particularly challenging in the United States. Mainstream news organizations tend to open the news gates to activists only after government has begun to engage publicly with their issues in legislative, executive, or legal institutions (Bennett 1991). True, protest activities may make news, but the coverage is typically in terms that portray activists as civilly disobedient and disruptive forces—a pattern applied to many voices critical of economic globalization (Bennett et al. 2004). Further complicating matters, issues such as sustainable development, workers' rights, and environmental degradation often fall beyond the will of governments to act. As a result, some global justice activists are attempting to create nonstate governance and regulatory systems (Beck 2000; Cashore, Auld, & Newson 2004).

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The general idea of activists trying to develop nongovernmental regulatory systems—complete with standards and certification processes for socially responsible production and consumption—is breathtaking in its ambition. The emergence and proliferation of so-called logo campaigns that attach political messages to corporate brands (e.g., Nike sweatshop) have become central tactics in mobilizing consumer power to get companies to accept such regulation (Klein 1999). This article explores the broad logic of logo campaigns as a means of developing political relationships among activists, consumers, producers, and corporations with the aim of regulating the global product chains that increasingly drive national economies and personal lifestyles. The first part of this analysis examines how branded political communication works. The second part looks at conditions that can make this form of messaging effective in reaching consumer audiences. The third part looks at the downside of trying to harness consumer power to get targeted companies and industrial sectors to change their offending behaviors.

Logo Logic: How Branded Communication Works

Attacking corporate brands is not in itself a new thing. Labor unions have long promoted boycotts and “buycotts” to use consumers to discipline the labor policies of companies. NGOs and activist groups have also used campaigns to get corporations such as Nestlé to stop offending practices such as distributing powdered infant milk formula to places where water contamination threatened the babies who consumed it (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Traditional *corporate campaigns* still occur under conditions of collective identification (such as union membership) and/or support from powerful institutions (such as the United Nations, which provided help to the Nestlé campaign). By contrast, contemporary globalization activists typically face low ideological commitment among consumers and little support from authoritative institutions in promoting regulatory standards. Indeed, consumer publics are often escaping formal politics and unpleasant issues within their lifestyle cocoons (Bennett 1998).

As a result, activists are learning to tap into personal identification with brands and recognizing the importance of lifestyles as the organizers of personal meaning in everyday life. Building on these social identity principles, the central elements of “logo logic” are (1) attaching political messages to so-called lifestyle brands that have already captured the collective attention of individual consumers; (2) communicating these branded messages through both digital and mass media, finding different gate-keeping points than the ones that filter conventional political

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news; and (3) using the (often negative) publicity about the brand to develop political relationships with corporations.

Attaching political messages to lifestyle brands

As citizens in postindustrial societies—particularly younger generations—are detaching from parties and group-based memberships, many of them are finding new ways to connect more directly with issues (environmentalism, social justice, health care, privacy, morality) that impact how they live their personal lives (Inglehart 1997; Bennett 1998). For example, the deforestation of coffee plantations in far-off lands by desperate farmers who are not paid a living price for their beans is seen by many conservationists as having a direct negative effect on the habitats of songbirds that migrate to North America. Hence, campaigns for “shade coffee” have direct personal links to issues such as bird watching, hiking, and other forms of nature appreciation that are associated with lifestyle values. If a so-called lifestyle brand such as Starbucks coffee can be associated with the destruction of bird habitat, consumers can be brought to the issue in ways that avoid conventional political action yet express personal values (Eliasoph 1998). Even if consumer pressure does not increase directly, a sustained public challenge to an otherwise strong lifestyle brand may produce a response from the company.

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Logo politics rely on the corporate target's having already done the difficult and costly work of reaching its consumer audience with branding. The brand is the key because, increasingly, what is being sold by corporations is less the product than the brand image (Klein 1999). In an era of global production systems, the manufacture of many products has become outsourced. Shoes and fashion for major brands such as Nike and Reebok or Gap may be produced in the same Vietnamese, Indonesian, or Chinese contract factories that are not owned by the companies.

In noisy media environments that bombard independent consumers with attractive choices, branding has become the byword for keeping products competitive. A brand's familiarity keeps loyal customers coming back despite growing competition, but it may also make them pay attention when disturbing messages

are attached to it. Thus, organic consumer activists who have trouble drawing broad public attention to the bovine growth hormones in milk, or to the genetic modification of soybeans and other foods, may have more success alerting Starbucks customers to the trouble lurking within their cappuccinos or soy lattes. Turning the familiar mermaid logo into a parody of Edvard Munch's *Scream* and playing on the brand name as "Frankenbucks" becomes a "culture jam" raising problematic aspects of lifestyle choices (Lasn 1999).

Logo politics rely on the corporate target's having already done the difficult and costly work of reaching its consumer audience with branding.

As a result of its attention-getting potential, branded communication can ease the audience problem that often plagues activists. Branded political messages often travel easily across media layers, from e-mail, to webzines and blogs, and even into the mass media through gates different than the ones that screen ordinary political news. These diffusion paths often begin with digital media content controlled by activists themselves.

New media rules

The advance of digital communication technologies enables activists to "Be the Media," as the slogan for Indymedia puts it. This capacity to participate in the production and distribution of media content is enabled at low cost by the proliferation of digital media technologies. Yet not all content travels equally. Branded messages cross diverse social networks more easily than conventional political content. For example, so-called culture jams often travel virally on the Internet, inviting recipients to click on links or go to Web sites where they can learn more about issues. Recipients may forward these jams on to friends, either out of concern or just because they are fun.

The viral transmission, network jumping, and media boundary crossing of Jonah Peretti's famous Nike sweatshop culture jam has become legendary. At the core of Peretti's "Nike sweatshop e-mail adventure" was a merger of content and media. The short, catchy, easily imitated and shared messages (called "memes") are the stuff of digital diffusion (Peretti n.d.). His online order for a pair of sneaks customized with the word "sweatshop" produced a hilarious exchange with a

representative from Nike, which Peretti forwarded to some friends. The friends and their chain of contacts forwarded it in turn, until, by one estimate, 11.4 million people received it. In the process, the exchange was posted on numerous blogs and Web sites in what Peretti calls the “middle media” where larger audiences gather, including commentators, producers, and journalists from the mass media who seek trends and new material. Soon, Peretti and his Nike/sweatshop message were featured in mainstream media around the world, including an invitation to appear on *The NBC Today Show* (Peretti 2004).

In many cases, branded messages that would not pass through media gates as hard news may be picked up as humor, consumer news (in the increasingly important category of “news you can use”), or as business stories about troubled companies. In these paths to publicity, branded communication finds the equivalent of “wormholes” in the news universe—a universe that is otherwise resistant to reporting radical political messages straight up. In short, globalization activists may still be disparaged or ignored in mainstream political news, but they may have greater success in getting their messages across by other means. As a result, hard-to-communicate messages about global coffee markets, sustainable agriculture, or community development in far-off lands may gain greater visibility when delivered through logo campaigns to pressure Starbucks to sell fair trade coffee, or to buy from shaded coffee farms that provide habitats for migratory birds. Similarly, hard-to-sell messages about labor conditions in foreign factories become easier to deliver when simplified and paired with a brand that already travels far and wide: Nike sweatshop. The next question is whether getting such messages into the consumer environment makes a difference in achieving activists’ political goals.

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Developing political relationships

The ultimate goal of much of this communication is to use consumer power to pressure companies and industries to change their behaviors. This is a tall order. Getting companies to mouth the words of social responsibility is one thing, but evaluating and certifying their actual practices is something else. Indeed, corporate

codes of conduct have swept many industries on the wings of public relations counsel that they are low cost and publicity-friendly first responses. However, it is far more difficult to get companies to disclose actual production or resource acquisition practices, or even to divulge the locations of factories. Even when companies cooperate, activists must find resources to conduct effective monitoring and certification of compliance. In short, there is a long chain of political relationships between getting the attention of consumers and using that attention to develop effective industry standards and certification systems that work. The next sections of the article explore the ups and downs of these complicated relationships that begin with the deceptively simple process of branded communication.

The Upside: Have Logo, Will Travel

There are several levels of thinking about what works in logo campaigns: (1) increasing the awareness of consumers; (2) holding a brand hostage in the media; (3) running low-cost, long-term “permanent” campaigns to sustain the threat to the brand; (4) using this sustained pressure to build political relationships with companies; and (5) creating regulatory mechanisms to actually induce change in corporate practices.

Consumer awareness

The question of how much consumers may understand about the politics behind a brand as a result of a logo campaign is often difficult to answer. Some more conventional consumer campaigns clearly achieve high levels of attention and awareness, as happened in the European case of the Brent Spar oil platform that Shell UK planned to dispose of by sinking off the coast of Scotland. Greenpeace organized a campaign and promoted a boycott of Shell gas stations. The issue made big news throughout Northern Europe when Greenpeace activists occupied the platform. It is likely that substantial awareness about the issue developed, in part because the perceived threat was immediate, and because publics had prior experience with devastating oil spills. This large-scale awareness led to what Micheletti (2003) called individualized collective action in the form of a boycott of Shell.

However, it is less clear if such levels of awareness and mobilization typically develop around the complex issues behind many logo campaigns. The relationship between Nike and its suppliers or Starbucks and its growers is much more ambiguous than connecting Shell to a possible oil spill. It is not clear how deep the consumer understanding goes in such logo campaigns. Indeed, this is an important area for future research. Even at the height of the campaign against Nike in the period from 1995 to 1998, it is impossible to untangle sales and profit drops from a series of larger structural problems that hit the entire industry (“Hitting the Wall” 2000). What does seem clear is that seeing their precious brand receive such negative publicity led corporate officers to address activist

demands. Holding the brand hostage may be a more important political lever in many campaigns than raising consumer consciousness.

Holding the brand hostage

In logo logic, it may not be necessary—or even possible—to get masses of consumers to fully grasp the politics behind the brand. What may matter more is the prospect of consumers developing a vague sense that the brand is no longer cool. The prospects of a brand “losing its cool” may travel quickly through the image tribes who swarm to trendy lifestyle images, and run away just as quickly (Turow 1997). Thus, companies may not wait to see if consumers are forming deeper understandings about politics at the sites of production—that might be too late. Suggestions of trouble in brand-land often produce preemptive reactions from targeted companies. The challenge for activists is to keep campaigns going long enough to extract meaningful responses.

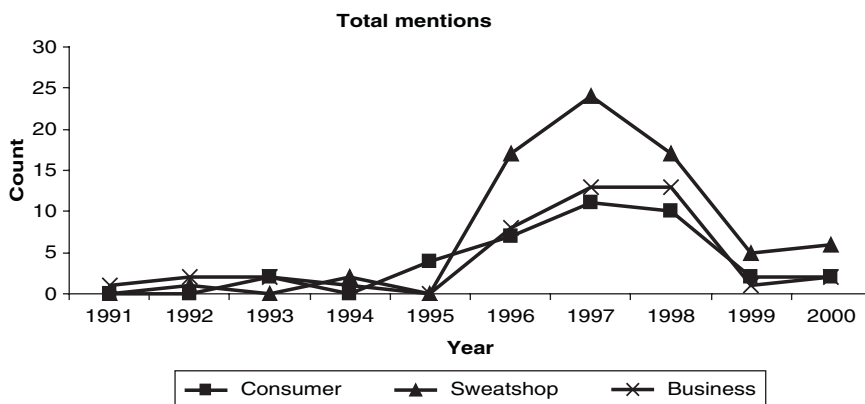
Sustaining pressure through permanent campaigns

Labor activist Jeff Ballinger had been working to publicize the downside of Nike’s business model since the late 1980s. His one-person campaign buzzed around Nike for several years until the activist networking organization Global Exchange joined forces in the mid-1990s and stepped up the pressure. The centerpiece of their campaign was a low-budget national tour for Indonesian factory workers who had been fired for demanding that factory owners pay the minimum wage. Simple public relations measures alerted journalists along the tour route that a press event would occur, often outside a Niketown. Activists were mobilized through e-mail networks to organize the protests. In addition, columnist Bob Herbert was sold on the story and became a loud national voice.

The result was the wave of publicity shown in Figure 1, which reflects a search of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* in the Nexis database for “Nike and Indonesia” between 1991 and 1998. This time span corresponds to the period from the first wire reports of abuses of workers in Nike contract factories in Indonesia (accompanied by Nike CEO Phil Knight’s denials), to Knight’s eventual public admission of responsibility for the problems and a vow to correct them.¹ As indicated, the dominant news framing at the peak of the campaign adopted the activists’ preferred term of *sweatshop*, followed by business and consumer frames that typically linked the sweatshop problem to core areas of company vulnerability.² The volume of stories peaked between 1995 and 1997, when Global Exchange became central to the campaign. Suddenly, Nike went from being a business success story to having a sweatshop problem that threatened its business image.

It is typical of logo campaigns that the entry of even one activist networking organization with modest resources can make a huge difference. As Ballinger put it, “Global Exchange turned my rundown, VW bus of a campaign into an 18 wheeler” (Bullert 2000, 8). Yet Global Exchange stepped back from the campaign

FIGURE 1
NIKE NEWS FRAMES IN THE NEW YORK TIMES
AND WASHINGTON POST, 1991-2000



following Knight's public promise to address the problems. In more centralized issue campaigns, this might mean the end of the attack on Nike. However, many logo campaigns develop a loosely organized, open structure that enables new organizations to enter and continue the campaign on new fronts. For example, in the late 1990s Students against Sweatshops led a campaign to get apparel companies such as Nike to join the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), a certification system for fair labor practices. The campaign received another wave of publicity as activists pressed colleges to sell campus gear from sweatshop-free companies. As of this writing, 158 colleges (including the entire University of California system) had joined the WRC ("Codes Don't Work" 2006).

Despite the success of the campaign at getting buy-in from many schools that control apparel licensing for large student markets, Nike resisted joining the WRC. The company affiliated, instead, with a competing certification organization, the Fair Labor Association (FLA). Many movement activists regard the FLA as a corporate shield rather than a prod to higher social responsibility. Our concern here is not to settle these different perceptions among activists but to point out the potential for slippage between campaign success at one level (in this case, publicity) and failure to establish desired political relationships with targets. Indeed, the competition between different standards systems is a common issue facing activists who are trying to do it by themselves.

Political relationships

As the Nike campaign suggests, the goal for activists is to get leading corporations to change their behavior (Manheim 2001). However, activists may disagree

on just how responsive a target has been. As a result, changes of corporate behavior may be regarded as victories by some activists and as public relations ploys by others. As mentioned above, Global Exchange turned down its pressure in the Nike campaign after the wave of publicity it helped to generate moved company founder and CEO Phil Knight to deliver a 1998 speech at the National Press Club in which he made the extraordinary admission that “the Nike product has become synonymous with slave wages, forced overtime, and arbitrary abuse.” He also promised a number of sweeping reforms, which, if implemented, would make Nike a leader in setting responsible global labor standards (“Hitting the Wall” 2000, 11). Knight’s dramatic public confession notwithstanding, the subsequent decision by Nike to affiliate with the FLA and not the WRC left many activists convinced that Nike would not become fully committed to the highest standards of labor justice. As a result, activists, including Jeff Ballinger and Students against Sweatshops, continued the campaign to press for Nike to join the WRC.

No matter how one regards Nike’s affiliation with one certification regime over another, the fact is that these campaigns have helped create fledgling systems for regulating corporate behavior in distant reaches of the world. A similar story could be told about the Clean Clothes Campaign in Europe (<http://www.cleanclothes.org/>). The establishment of such regulatory systems in the absence, or with only peripheral involvement, of government is an interesting and important development in its own right.

Regulation without government

Many product sectors now have functioning standards certification systems. A common model is to support these certification processes through fees paid by companies to certification organizations. As part of their certification, companies or other profitable middle organizations in a chain of consumption may also be required to pay premiums or commit resources directly to producers or suppliers to help achieve various goals, such as offering coffee growers a fair price for their crops, or giving factory workers training and support in making labor rights claims. In the fair trade (FT) coffee sector, for example, there is an international Fairtrade Labeling Organization (FLO) that works with affiliated NGOs in various nations to seek compliance from businesses and to develop markets for fair trade products. When a company such as Starbucks is certified by an FLO affiliate such as TransFair, the company can display an official certification trademark on bags or products containing the certified coffee. FLO affiliate Max Havelaar operates similarly in various European countries. (For an overview of this process in the United States, see http://www.transfairusa.org/content/certification/producer_certification_guide.php.) Coffee is the oldest fair trade product in the United States (1989), and the most successful, with sales in the United States (the leading fair trade nation) rising from roughly \$89 million in 2001, to \$369 million in 2004, and \$500 million in 2005 (Fair Trade Federation 2004; Wilkinson 2006, 17). To put this in perspective, Proctor and Gamble alone made roughly \$1 billion in

profits from its Folgers brand in 2001 and continues to resist the campaign against it, as explained below (Organic Consumers Association 2001).

In short, despite encouraging developments in industries from food, to fashion, to forest products, there are also problems inherent in using logo campaigns to leverage nongovernmental regulatory schemes. Despite the appeal of branded communication, logo campaigns may also send mixed messages due to lack of coordination among different organizations. The lack of (governance) mechanisms to reconcile differences may result in the proliferation of different and sometimes competing standards systems. Where this makes for confusing signals to consumers, the chain of communication power driving these systems may be broken.

The Downside of Branded Political Communication

As noted above, one of the greatest challenges to branded consumer politics is the frequent lack of coordination among activists targeting the same companies, often resulting in the proliferation of different messages and a confusing array of regulatory systems in many areas. This can lead to a cascade of other disconnections down the chain linking consumer power to improving conditions at the sites of production.

Multiple messages and competing regulatory systems

Many certification systems compete for the regulation of coffee alone. The primary systems include Bird Friendly (shade and habitat protection), Organic (regulating pesticides, chemicals, soil, and growing practices), Rainforest Alliance (forest preservation, sustainable agriculture), Fair Trade (paying a fair price and developing sustainable local grower communities), and Utz Kapeh (good agriculture and worker welfare). A similar profusion of what Cashore, Auld, and Newson (2004) called nonstate market-driven governance systems (NSMD) has occurred in the forest products sector. The fashion sector has also followed a familiar path with the proliferation of multiple systems, ranging from the FLA and WRC in the United States to a number of others internationally. Even when particular systems are successful, as in the case of FT coffee, problems with them can be traced to inherent limitations of logo logic.

Disconnects in the chain of consumer power

One undesirable result of the proliferation of certification regimes is that some large companies may decide to join standards systems, yet not post the trademarks on products for fear of confusing branded consumers (Consumers International 2005). This breaks the chain of communication-driven political pressure: if consumers do not receive continuing signals about the products they

buy, awareness and demand break down. Another related problem is that some campaigns may target companies effectively, yet not reach consumers to increase awareness of the underlying issues. For example, activists targeted Home Depot with demands to carry lumber products certified by the Forest Stewardship Council. Holding the Home Depot logo hostage led to an agreement to sell certified products, yet the campaign probably did not educate many Home Depot consumers about the deeper politics or issues of forest certification (de Graf 2006). By contrast, public service ads on public television in the Netherlands resulted in high levels of consumer awareness about sustainable forest management. In the latter case, consumer awareness feeds back into the chain of demand for certified products and, in addition, may grow the ranks of activists spreading the cause (de Graaf 2006).

Limits to lifestyle brands

Another challenge to logo campaigns is the inherent limitation of lifestyle brands in some sectors. Nike is clearly a lifestyle brand that is also an industry leader with the capacity to set a new tone in the apparel sector. By contrast, even if Starbucks became a leader in fair trade coffee, it is not clear that other, far larger, brands would follow; their consumers simply may not be having the same kind of lifestyle experiences with mass consumption coffee. For example, Kraft (Maxwell House) has been targeted with fair trade campaigns, yet its code of conduct remained a conservative affirmation of belief in the free market as the best regulatory mechanism (Oxfam International 2002, 28). Following this logic, Proctor and Gamble agreed to make its lifestyle brand Millstone fair trade, but it has resisted converting its dominant brand, Folgers. Millstone represents just 5 percent of Proctor and Gamble's \$1 billion profit on coffee. The campaign against Folgers goes on as of this writing, but there seems little way to reach its consumers with messages that worked for Starbucks (Organic Consumers Association 2003). The limits of using logo communication to expand the scope of consumer pressure are fairly clear in the cases of these nonlifestyle brands.

Conclusion

Branded political communication uses the work already done by advertising to send messages to audiences. The merger of political content and familiar brand identifications may help activist messages clear the first threshold of public communication: getting the attention of a desired audience or at least making the media in ways that get the attention of corporate managers. By contrast, more conventional communication can make activists sound shrill and preachy to people who actively seek to avoid the unpleasantness of political intrusions in their private lives.

While branding communication may help messages travel, do those messages actually raise consumer awareness about the politics beyond the brands? Here

the answer seems a bit mixed. On the plus side, the growth of certification systems seems clear. For example, world Fair Trade sales have grown steadily since the inception of organized FT some two decades ago. In addition to adding a social justice dimension to the act of consumption in the north, people in the global south seem to be benefiting as well. FT currently benefits some 5 million people, including five hundred producer groups and 1 million farmers in forty-nine countries according to FLO data (Wilkinson 2006, 27). However, the story becomes a bit less clear when we consider the diversity of certification systems and issue frames that may end up confusing the very consumers whose continuing demand is so important to the effectiveness and growth of the process itself. Even the informed consumer may not find it easy to make political choices among the dizzying array of trademarks on coffee in stores.

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Some of these coordination problems can be traced to the absence of binding (e.g., governmental) means of reconciling different standards systems. In the absence of institutional support, the viability of many systems depends on finding the resources to pay for the monitoring and certification of corporate compliance, and to expand markets for certified goods so that companies may eventually self-regulate on grounds that it is simply good for business. Yet the uphill struggle in these systems is that companies often initially prefer those systems that demand the least, which weakens the strength of subsequent signaling to consumers. For example, in the apparel sector, the FLA, like many certification organizations, is supported largely by company contributions, which, in the view of some activists, gives companies too much leverage over standards. Not surprisingly, most U.S. apparel companies that have joined a certification system have joined the FLA, which also included 194 colleges and universities as of this writing (FLA 2004, 2005). Even when colleges seek to comply with stronger apparel certification criteria of the WRC, the absence of many corporate members or other stable source of revenue means that few resources are available to monitor factories or train workers in claiming and defending their rights (“Codes Don’t Work” 2006). The grand dilemma is that logo campaigns and culture jamming may win public attention and success at some levels, but there are many

other links in the process that must be joined in order to create a successful system for producing “clean” clothes or “just” coffee.

Notes

1. For a timeline of events in the Nike campaign, see the chronology at the Center for Communication and Civic Engagement, <http://depts.washington.edu/ccce/polcommcampaings/NikeChronology.htm>.

2. Based on thirty-two *Washington Post* and seventy-two *New York Times* stories and editorials gathered in a Nexis search of “Nike and Indonesia” between 1991 and 2000. Coder reliability calculated by Cohen’s kappa based on two independent coders was .91 for the sweatshop code, 1.0 for the business code, and .7 for the consumer code, indicating good to excellent reliability across the three reported codes.

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