

A Metia report

# Building a Content Engine

How to build a scalable, repeatable model for great corporate storytelling



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## Introduction

Content marketing is the vehicle by which brands can scale conversations with customers, understanding and anticipating the needs and questions they have at every step, from first impression to advocacy.

Successful content not only lands at the right time in the right place, it builds trust and establishes an authentic relationship with customers. The Content Marketing Institute's Enterprise Content Marketing Insights 2021 report found that top content marketing performers stood out from the crowd in a few key areas. Top performing respondents were much more likely than others to have a documented content marketing strategy, use an editorial calendar and metrics to measure content performance, and were also more likely to have six or more full-time employees dedicated to content<sup>1</sup>. All key components of a successful content engine.

A 2020 study found that 77% of marketers say content marketing increases engagement [and] 72% say it has increased the number of leads.<sup>2</sup> Useful, usable content helps people make informed decisions, learn something new, or simply be entertained. In turn, it's a tool to scale the conversation that brands should be having with their audiences, ultimately building trust and driving action.

Content comes with two inherent challenges. The challenge of frequency and that of quality. Production usually falls into two camps:

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**1** **Bogged down in process.** Content is churned out like sausages on a conveyor belt. Quality is sacrificed for the sake of hitting deadlines and reaching scale. There's lots of content but no consistent value for the audience.

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**2** **Blighted by perfection.** Content takes weeks to get through approval, there are double digit iterations. It's impossible to get into any sort of production rhythm and there are large time gaps between each piece of content.

The golden egg is to create high quality content, consistently and at scale. Research shows that only 1 in 5 marketers claim to know the best way to run a content marketing campaign<sup>3</sup>. In practice, this leads to reactionary and ad hoc content projects as opposed to proactive and planned ones.

<sup>1</sup> <https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/2021-enterprise-research-final.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://optinmonster.com/content-marketing-statistics/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://review42.com/resources/content-marketing-statistics>

Content teams can feel powerless under the whims of their stakeholders, as opposed to in control of their strategy. It's difficult to find a content marketer who hasn't stumbled into a never-ending approval cycle at least once.

Bringing in some clear areas of alignment and accountability can often help to overcome these challenges, and codifying that accountability into a program creates what we call at Metia a "content engine"—a humming, well-oiled machine for producing content. Not only does building an engine allow for scale, it puts in place the right considerations to ensure frequency and quality

This guide covers the areas of consideration we undertake when setting up content engines and is built from years of experience helping our clients jumpstart their own content programs.

We've outlined the operating model needed to build a content engine and the three layers that form the process: strategy, orchestration, and execution. The following sections will provide a framework that will serve as a guide when aligning business goals and outline the organizational structure to generate content outputs.

# 2

## The operating model for building a content engine

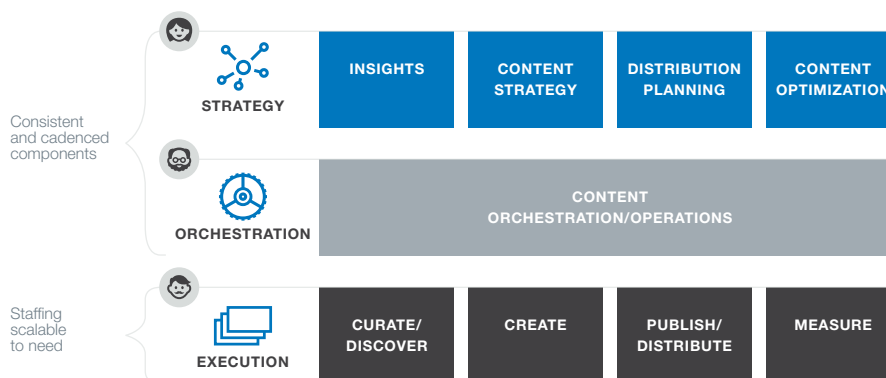
The first step in creating a content engine is understanding the layers of accountability. This informs the composition of the team that runs the content engine, outlines their responsibilities, and defines where they can integrate and work together to make sure the right checks and balances are in place.

A content engine cannot be established by one person. Different members of the team can help content leaders make decisions about hiring, staff augmentation, outsourcing, or consultancy. They will also inform the scope of the engine program itself. Figure 1 below presents an overview of the operating model and shows where the layers of accountability lie.

Figure 1:

### Building blocks: the operating model for the content engine

Distinct roles and responsibilities broken out into layers create clear areas of accountability



It's important to note that these three elements are not in order; they instead work in unison throughout the content production process. Running one without the others leads to inefficient content production. It's also key that these layers are clearly defined so that each member of the team can keep their section of the engine running.

## Strategy

The key to a successful strategy is ensuring that both business needs and an understanding of the audience are reflected in content. This establishes the purpose of all content to be produced and gives a clear direction. It's imperative that this is written down and shared with relevant stakeholders. This will safeguard quality, and ensure a focus on providing the audience with valuable information.

The strategy layer involves:

- 1 Insights** to understand the specific audience and inform content strategy.
- 2 Content strategy** to plan what content will be produced for what audience.
- 3 Distribution planning** to enable the team to deliver on time and in the right places.
- 4 Content optimization** to ensure that content is performing to the best of its ability.

## Orchestration

Orchestration involves overseeing the production process and ensuring that content is created, approved, and published on time while maintaining quality standards and contributing to the objectives outlined by strategy. Orchestration is the more operational layer and has more consistent components and staffing.

The orchestration layer involves:

- 1 Developing an editorial calendar** to track publishing schedules and content types through time across the organization's distribution channels.
- 2 Building a process map and ongoing program or project management** to ensure the timely publication of content in accordance with the editorial calendar.
- 3 Concepting content and briefing creators** to get the ideas into the hands of employees in charge of turning vision into reality.
- 4 Templating a core mix of assets** to systemize the creation process, making it more efficient and repeatable.
- 5 Creating reports** to analyze results and improve outcomes over time.

## Execution

The execution layer handles the creation of content itself, ensuring output aligns with quality standards and the strategic brief.

The execution layer involves:

- 1 Content curation and discovery** to broaden content offerings.
- 2 Content creation**, which can involve interviews (both internal or external), copywriting, asset design, editing, QA, and review.
- 3 Publishing and distribution** executing on the distribution plan outlined in the strategy layer.
- 4 Measurement** to monitor performance with a view to iterate and optimize new and existing content.



# 3

## Assembling the right team

Once the operating model has been established, it's critical to take a step back to evaluate team resources. What can be done in-house, what will someone need to be hired for, and what can be outsourced?

Different tasks will run at different frequencies and require staffing not only within the marketing team but potentially elsewhere. Tasks such as keeping content up to date on a website might seem straightforward, but depending on an organization's tech stack and team structure, it might end up being more difficult than it sounds. Spotting these resource needs early will save any hiring headaches down the line—especially since both recruitment and procurement can take a long time.

Each layer has a group of typical roles that work on relevant tasks. Using these job titles, teams can be built out and the structure of the content engine can be mapped out.

### Strategy

Within an organization, the typical roles that own the activities in this layer are:

Figure 2:



### Orchestration

Within an organization, the typical roles that own the activities in this layer are:

Figure 3:



## Execution

Within an organization, the typical roles that own the activities in this layer are:

Figure 4:



## Real-world applications

Some content engines keep all strategy in-house but outsource the execution and orchestration. Others will simply outsource execution as overflow services or staff augmentation to add scale, while the rest is managed in-house.

Alternatively, some seek an agency partner for a more integrated arrangement. The right partner can support across strategy, orchestration and execution. This often includes strategic guidance, program management and content production.

There is no single correct way to allocate resources between each layer. Establishing a content engine depends on the capabilities required for a company's goals, what capabilities the team or network has, and where the biggest internal pain points lie. The critical factor is to ensure that responsibilities are clearly outlined and accountability is upheld.

# 4

## Establishing the building blocks

Once the operating model has been established, team resourcing has been decided, and a view of how content fits into the wider business strategy is understood, we have the foundation of a functioning content engine.

We can then move on to understanding exactly what outputs should be expected from each team as well as how to make the production process repeatable.

### Content strategy

As content continues to be created at an accelerated rate, cutting through the noise becomes critical. It's necessary to create a Fair Exchange of Value, whereby content—whether it's informative, educational, or entertaining—must actively give back to the audience. They should always find themselves gaining something from a piece. Finding common ground is key to discovering where this value lies, balancing what the brand wants to say and what the audience wants to hear. Establishing this mutual resonance will allow brands to create meaningful engagement with their audiences and avoid being lost in the noise. Keeping the Fair Exchange of Value concept at the core of any content strategy will steer production towards higher quality outputs.

To help navigate the concept of the Fair Exchange of Value, try answering these questions:

Figure 5:








These questions must be considered before any strategy progresses. Without answers, audiences who are watching, reading or listening are unlikely to receive any value in return for their time. Once established, this foundation for strategic briefs and content plans allows the team to focus more of their time on production because the big-picture questions have been answered at the program level.

## Platform selection

Platform choice is not only the biggest factor for context; it also defines what the content engine ultimately needs to power. One should devise and select channels thoughtfully, as that choice will impact cadence, process, and total cost of the content engine.

Typical formats for a content engine include:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
|  Blog                      |  Owned social channels such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram |
|  Customer story repository |  Resource hub   |
|  YouTube or video stream   |  Newsletter   |

Essentially, any platform that requires a regular flow of fresh content is fair game. It's a different kind of commitment than a program focused on evergreen content, which is more about ongoing maintenance than ongoing production.

Knowing which platforms will be used can help decide which formats to build into the content engine. Pre-establishing these options ahead of time enables the team to develop a smooth production process for each platform.

## Success metrics

The final important piece in a strategy layer is to document what the key performance indicators (KPIs) are for the content engine. This will include:

- Content performance
- Marketing/sales impact
- Production efficiency

These KPIs enable content iteration and improvement. A closed feedback loop will quickly highlight which areas of the content engine need tweaking to ensure everything runs smoothly. If content performance is struggling, that might mean adapting strategy. If production efficiency is lacking, then execution could be the area that needs attention. Actions needed in response to KPIs will be entirely contextual based on organizational circumstances, but without them it's impossible to build a fully functional engine.

## Documenting the content strategy

It's important to document the content strategy so that content creators have some key value-based benchmarks to refer to and execute against. In essence, this step ensures that teams don't create content in a vacuum and that each piece ties back to the top-level content strategy while driving toward overarching business goals.

Despite this knowledge, it's surprising that many teams still don't effectively document their content strategy efforts. While 69%<sup>4</sup> of B2B marketers with successful marketing strategies use documentation as part of their process, only 41%<sup>5</sup> document their content strategy. While marketers can find success without documentation, success comes more easily to those who do.

4 [https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2020\\_B2B\\_Research\\_Final.pdf](https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2020_B2B_Research_Final.pdf)

5 [https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2020\\_B2B\\_Research\\_Final.pdf](https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2020_B2B_Research_Final.pdf)

Elements to consider documenting include:



Audience profiles and interests



Content themes and narrative structure



Brand positioning and tone of voice



Campaign performance metrics



ROI

Documenting these basic elements and executing against them allows the measurement of campaign performance over time and determines the efficacy of the content engine.

### Content orchestration

Content orchestration is the detailed day-to-day management of content delivery and style. The tools involved in content governance can and may include content workflows, editorial guidelines, style guides, editorial management boards, and/or publishing calendars.<sup>6</sup>

It can also be known as content governance, especially in instances outside of a content engine model where content is being maintained over time, such as on a website, within a digital asset management tool, or within a knowledge base.<sup>7</sup>

There are five key goals to any properly orchestrated content engine:



#### Scalability

The system works well with small volumes of content as well as large.



#### Speed

Updates can be made quickly when needed.



#### Consistency

Content adheres as closely as possible to established style requirements as well as quality standards.



#### Purpose

Content affirms the overall strategy, mission, and goals of the given property.



#### Relevance

Content effectively translates the purpose of the property into a format or style which is relevant to its intended audience.

Often, these goals will balance each other. Speed without purpose or relevance, for example, is a wasted effort. However, paying no attention at all to speed may produce highly strategic content that is impactful to its audience but at too slow a pace to be practical.

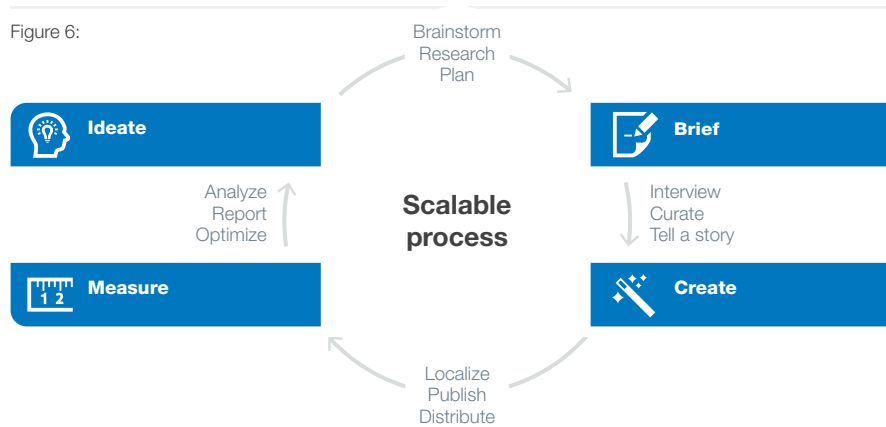
In short, content orchestration is the heart of a content engine. It should operationalize content management so that it's easy to translate strategy to tactical delivery. Strong oversight is critical for success.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cmswire.com/cms/web-engagement/content-strategy-5-essentials-for-governance-success-011426.php>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cmswire.com/cms/web-engagement/content-strategy-5-essentials-for-governance-success-011426.php>

## Establishing the strategic production workflow

While different processes can have different steps and degrees of detail, they generally follow this progression:



Here's a brief overview of things to consider for each stage of the process.



### Ideate

- How will production teams use strategic documents to inform per-piece content ideas? Will direction be outlined in a content plan or playbook, agreed upon in an editorial calendar meeting, or figured out another way?
- How often will new ideas be generated and discussed?



### Brief

- What role do content creators have in brief creation?
- What templates, artifacts, and/or meetings should be planned to ensure that content creators and stakeholders are aligned on the concept and direction before drafting begins?
- Is that process correctly proportioned so that it's thorough enough to reduce churn at later stages but not unnecessarily bogging down the initial phases?



### Create

- How many drafts and rounds of review are needed and expected?
- Who needs to review and provide feedback?
- What are their criteria for evaluation? What guidance is given to reviewers of their role in providing feedback?



### Publish

- What teams manage publishing, especially for digital channels? Are they distributed or centralized?
- Are there additional tags or information that need to be completed to support publishing?
- What technology/systems do we use to support publishing?



### Measure

- What key statistics should the team use to quantify ROI?
- What goals will they measure against and what level of the marketing funnel will they correlate to?
- How will they quantify their measurements and use them to improve performance?

## Tracking how it all gets done

There are many different tools that can be used to track content performance, and it's important to realize that there's no one right way to achieve this goal. Here are the most common tools used by content marketers that can be changed or adapted to be fit for many purposes.



### Tracker or editorial calendar

Create an editorial calendar or tracker to monitor production efforts, set deadlines, and identify content owners. A well-designed tracker will not only give the content engine defined parameters to operate under and help organize the team, but it will also:

- Give teams a production cadence informed by business needs
- Allow them to react to environmental changes in real time (think product launches or time-sensitive content based on current events)
- Provide an additional tool to measure goals against



### Reporting

Every functioning content engine must have a window into performance, and there are numerous tools that can help. Google Analytics offers function and customization out of the box, and any number of reporting dashboards could program to quantify KPIs. Regardless of route taken, it's important to remember that too much data under certain circumstances can be as bad as too little. Set up reporting to give only the necessary information and expand as new needs arise.



### Collaboration space

Set up a collaboration space to give the team more agility and enable real-time cooperation. There are a lot of options available (such as Teams, Slack, Docs, or another specialized solution), but as a baseline, the platform should offer communication and document sharing alongside editing functionality.



### Making meetings meaningful

A content engine will require regular meetings, but each should have an intentional purpose. Consider what meetings will have value on a daily, weekly, monthly, and quarterly cadence.

## Content execution

The hidden value of a content engine lies in the rhythm it gives to publishing cadence, as it helps combat the production fatigue that so many marketers face. Many marketers acknowledge that production is the most difficult part of the job, and 60% have admitted they have a hard time consistently producing content.<sup>8</sup>

The mode of execution tends to fall into three main types:

- Regular rhythm content, like blogs, short-form video, customer stories, or organic social media, where content requires a regular flow of fresh posts
- Evergreen content, like many websites or knowledge bases, where maintaining content to keep it fresh as opposed to generating lots of net new content is more important
- Content supporting moments in time, like targeted campaigns or event support

<sup>8</sup> <https://optinmonster.com/content-marketing-statistics/>

## Format selection

Platform and format are two sides of one coin—they both determine the context in which someone will encounter content.

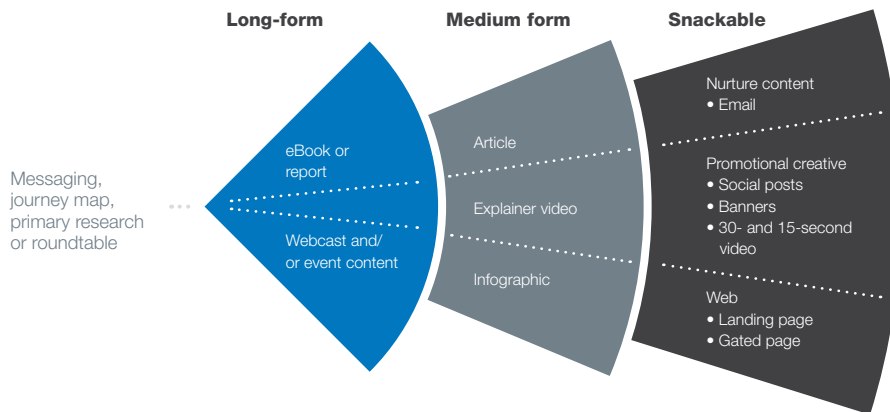
While some content engines focus on a single format, like a blog, there's an increasing trend toward a matrixed approach that includes multiple formats or content packages. This approach delivers two benefits:

1. It satisfies different needs for different audiences. Metia conducted a study on customer advocacy content and found that having multiple formats is a key driver for credibility.
  - a. People learn in different ways; some people are more visual, where others prefer to read or listen. Different formats can also suit needs of different audience segments, like an executive summary versus a technical deep dive, or beginner versus advanced versions of a concept.
2. Economies of scale. It's much easier to build, extract, and repurpose meaningful chunks of content that are related to the same concept or story while a team is already in the process of crafting core content. This could include generating a quote set and PowerPoint deck for sales teams to accompany a case study, or creating a landing page with relevant ad creative to promote an eBook that is still in production.

Figure 7:

### An asset mix built for scalable content journeys

Using high value inputs, content should be built in packages to support integrated campaigns as well as achieve efficiency of scale.



### Getting the details right: content quality

Creating quality content is the goal of every marketer, yet there's plenty of evidence that this is getting harder and harder to do. As the value of quality content rather than quantity of content has increased, so too have the demands on those who produce it. Marketers have found it increasingly challenging to produce engaging content, with 65% saying it's a problem they face.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> <https://optinmonster.com/content-marketing-statistics/>

In addition, the amount of time it takes to produce something as straightforward as a blog now takes longer than it used to, in response to the rising quality bar. In 2014 it took 2 hours 24 minutes to produce a blog post. In 2019 this number grew to 3 hours 57 minutes—a 65% increase.<sup>10</sup>

Taking a step back to develop tools and processes can help to address these challenges and enable the development of consistently stellar output.



### Visual brand guide

Visual branding is just as important as the voice and tone of a brand. The three components can be thought of as a Venn diagram, with the middle section painting a picture of what the brand represents.

The visual brand is especially powerful because customers will get their first impressions the moment a page loads, before they even have a chance to read any words or get into the core content of a video—and there’s a plethora of statistics that show retention increases with quality visual content. It’s part of the reason infographics have seen a 65% increase in usage by B2B marketers in the last five years.<sup>11</sup> Creating a visual brand guide for content creators is highly recommended. The fonts, color palette, and image choices will all affect the impressions a brand makes on potential customers.



### Editorial style guide

Many marketers may say they don’t have strong preferences about editorial style, but start asking their opinion about serial commas and there are bound to be differences of opinion. And at the end of the day, inconsistencies like that are a detriment to the credibility of what the content is trying to articulate. If there isn’t a house style, create a cheat sheet for the most important language guidance and pick a main reference, like the Chicago Manual of Style or AP Stylebook.



### Examples of stellar content in each format

Give teams access to a variety of content types so that they know what good content should look like. If a content engine is strictly developing case studies, teams need to be provided with case study examples. If it’s developing white papers or blogs, provide examples of those. If an engine is responsible for creating a variety of different content types, provide examples for each. Whatever the case, make sure team members are informed enough to make intelligent decisions based on what has worked in the past while still allowing for creative flexibility.



### Checklists

Create checklists for team members to reference throughout the creative process. It should be easy to access and allow them to “check the boxes” on all the key points the content is trying to provide. Not only will this reduce editorial churn, but it will reinforce accountability at each stage of content production.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.smartinsights.com/content-management/content-marketing-strategy/essential-content-marketing-statistics/#:~:text=69%25%20of%20B2B%20marketers%20have%20a%20documented%20content%20strategy&text=When%20looking%20at%20B2B%20marketer,least%20successful>

<sup>11</sup> <https://review42.com/resources/content-marketing-statistics/#:~:text=7.,a%20documented%20content%20marketing%20strategy.&text=If%20you%20need%20to%20know,past%20few%20years%20to%2069%25>



## Conclusion

All the pieces of the content engine we covered make up components of a collected whole. Just as a motor can't run without fuel and pistons, a content engine can't run without strategy, orchestration, and execution.

Get started by creating a checklist to make sure all the requisite parts are assembled:

- Build the right team and establish key players:
  - Strategists
  - Orchestrators
  - Creatives
- For strategy, document:
  - Desired distribution channels
  - Content formats
  - What metrics are in place to track success
- For content orchestration, think in terms of the five key goals:
  - Scalability
  - Speed
  - Consistency
  - Purpose
  - Relevance
- Establish a workflow:
  - Ideate
  - Brief
  - Create
  - Publish
  - Measure
- Build an editorial calendar and/or content tracker
- Establish visual and editorial style guidelines

With these organizational principles in place, a content engine will make the creation process simpler, from ideation to publication. There won't be lingering questions about who is responsible for what, when the content is due, or how the content is to be created, because the workflow and guidelines are established, acting as guardrails during every stage of the process.

We believe this will make content production not only easier, more organized, and more measurable, but also more meaningful for readers and more satisfying for the production team—and we have years of experience with global clients building content engines that show that these principles work. We've seen first hand that by empowering content teams to take control of their strategies, they can escape the never-ending approval cycle and bring in clear lines of accountability. Codifying that into a replicable program will not only increase content frequency, but also improves the quality of output.

## About Metia

Metia Group is a global marketing agency with offices in London, Seattle, Austin, and Singapore. We employ over 100 marketing professionals; each is an expert in a particular area of specialization.

Our clients include big corporations and ambitious businesses. We provide them with structured marketing programs that reach across geographies, scale massively, can be deployed systematically, and are measured relentlessly.

Metia has specialist services designed to support our clients in the areas of Insight, Demand, Content, and Advocacy. These services are based upon deep expertise and proven methodologies and enabled by unique tools and systems.

In addition to working with technology and digital-native businesses, Metia works with global banks, community banks, credit unions, neo-banks and fintechs across North America, Europe, and Asia, helping them to design new customer experiences, build brands that resonate online, and connect with new audiences.

To learn more about our capabilities and discuss how we could help you reach and engage your target audiences with focused, measurable campaigns, please contact us at [info@metia.com](mailto:info@metia.com).

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