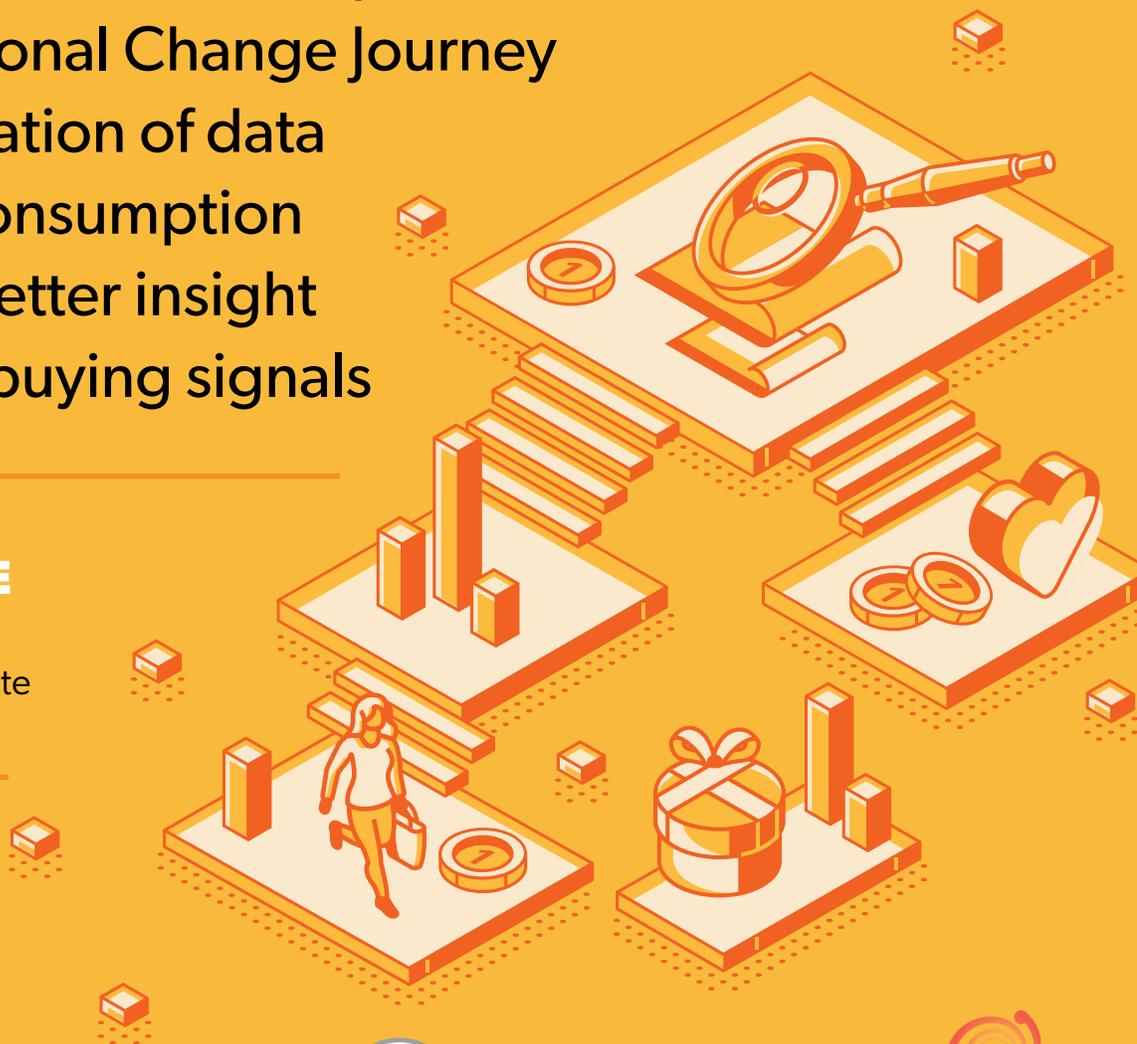


CONTENT BASED MARKETING IN THE AGE OF INTENT

How B2B marketers can map the buyer's Intentional Change Journey with a combination of data and content consumption tools to gain better insight into potential buying signals

BY ROBERT ROSE

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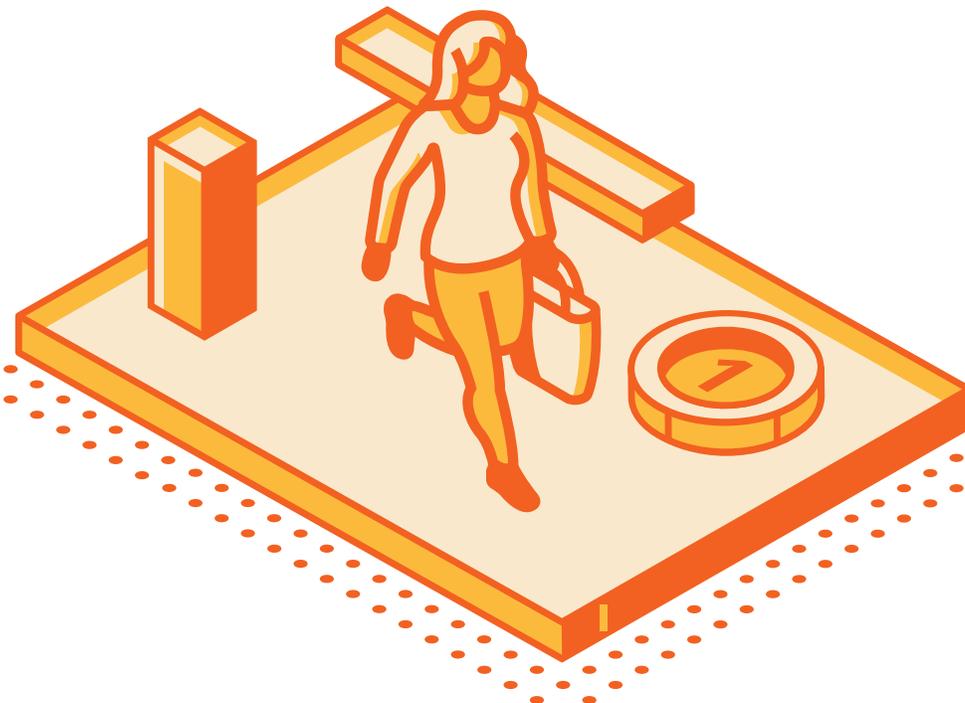
WELCOME

Contentgine is proud to sponsor another engaging and educational piece from the thought leader in content marketing, Robert Rose. This critical piece of insight, entitled “Content based Marketing in the Age of Intent,” provides a roadmap for a better customer journey by analyzing data provided by new content consumption tools, and ways to provide context to content consumption.

Rose first lays out a novel insight in how buyers are seeking incremental change versus rip and replace for their challenges. He then leads us through how this journey has changed from a single source of truth from a vendor to a cornucopia of product information, wherein a buyer relies less on the salesperson and more on the Internet.

From there, Rose invokes Boyatzis’ Intentional Change Process, with its “five common sense steps” to achieve lasting change. Next, we go on a new journey, Rose’s four part analysis of the modern buying journey, ending in an amazing insight into how the modern buying journey is about mitigating change.

Our company finds Rose’s work and insight invaluable to content marketers, and as the leading company in content based marketing, we are keen to integrate his thinking into improving our clients’ content marketing initiatives. We sincerely hope you enjoy his wisdom and insights.



INTRODUCTION:

BUYING JOURNEYS BECOME INTENTIONAL

The entire nature of business-to-business (B2B) buying has changed.

In an ironic twist, rather than focusing on the buyer's experience, most of today's marketing strategy research often focuses on the transformation of the B2B marketer's efforts. Much like B2B marketing and sales itself, we so often look at the relationship between B2B businesses and buyers through the lens of *"enough about me, let's talk about you. What do you think about me?"*

There are volumes of research on how digital marketing approaches need to change to meet the needs of the modern B2B buyer. But we don't often focus on how much the actual buying process has been transformed by the way we now market our products and services.

As business managers, we must remember that it is not simply a one-way street. The Internet and associated digital technology not only continue to transform the way organizations sell products and services, but they have also upended the way customers purchase things.

Prior to the Internet and, perhaps most strikingly, web search, B2B buying could best be described as discovery driven. When it came to new or innovative purchases (as opposed to simple commodity re-buys), businesses would primarily discover options for new products and services through trade journals and their existing relationships with current vendors. As today, buyers required an education into changing materials, technologies, and services that would give their business an edge. But once they discovered that this new "thing" existed, their primary source of information would be their existing, trusted network.

In fact, in one B2B study from 1987, researchers found that when it came to purchases of new products and services, there was a *"strong association of newness and the amount of information desired, but a weak correlation of this information and the consideration of alternative sources."*¹ Put very simply: B2B buyers needed more information for new purchases vs. rebuys of existing products but preferred to get it from their existing vendor relationships. Is it any wonder that in the 1984 book *Industrial Marketing Strategy*, the authors discuss the importance of the relationships of sales personnel to buyers? They say that "buyers have a heavy reliance on their sales representatives... [they are] the backbone of new product marketing effectiveness."²

Today, marketers understand that the nature of product information gathering (and its sources) has fundamentally changed the B2B buying journey. What's not as clear is whether the role of salespeople is decreasing, or if buyers are longing for a previous era when they could trust their sales colleagues. One article in *Harvard Business Review* pointed out that the modern salesperson isn't just a facilitator of a sale, but also "educator, negotiator, consultant, solution configurator, service provider, and relationship manager. They are integral to discovering the 'something more' that customers want."³

THE PURCHASING JOURNEY HAS CHANGED

What is undeniable, however, is that the purchasing journey has evolved into a change-driven process. In fact, we can observe that new purchases have become what sociologists would call an intentional change process.

The intentional change process is a theory developed by Dr. Richard Boyatzis, a professor at Case Western Reserve University, in 2006 outlining five common-sense steps that can be followed if one desires to make a lasting change.⁴ The five steps can be summarized as:

1. Envision the ideal destination (by describing a desired outcome for our future)
2. Explore the actual gaps to get there (by asking what is needed to manifest that future)
3. Develop a learning agenda (by developing our expertise to build roadmaps)
4. Execute and practice the new habits (by deploying a test bed of the new habit)
5. Get support (by solidifying the relationships that will help us stick to our new habit)

If we look at this in the context of today's prototypical B2B buyer's journey, we can see these two processes line up almost exactly.

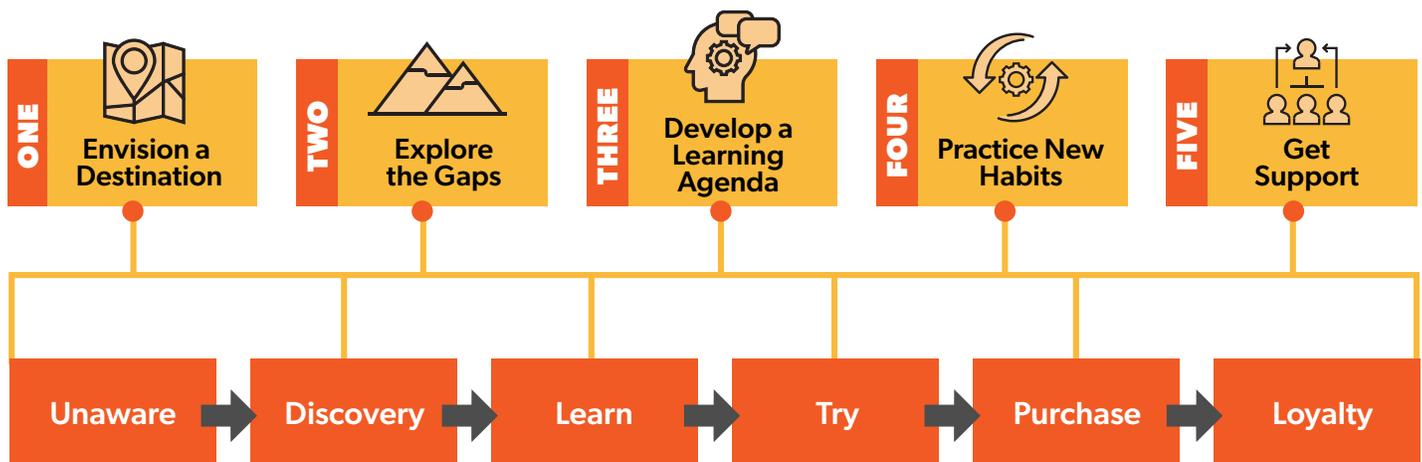


Figure 1 - Intentional Change and the B2B Buyer's Journey

In today's modern buyer's journey, companies increasingly start with a desired future change to the business. Then, what is usually an assembled team explores and focuses on internal gaps to narrow down the type of solution that makes the most sense. Following that, the team collects information from all manner of sources – including vendors, consultants, analysts, and even competitors – to become subject matter experts in this category of solution. Next comes a trial of the product, a prototype of the new operation, or a proof of concept. Then, finally, once the decision is made, the buying group facilitates an internal process and support team for successful change management and implementation of the new solution into the group.

PART ONE:

THE MODERN CHALLENGE OF B2B BUYING

Over the last 10 years, B2B marketing processes have mostly evolved to address the intentional change journey by “being found” when buyers go about any of those first three steps: envisioning an ideal destination, exploring the gaps, and developing their learning agenda.

This fundamental shift, and marketing’s associated activities, are supported by some of the most current research showing that:

- ▶ 78% of buyers start with an Internet search.⁵
- ▶ Sales representatives have roughly 5% of a customer’s time during their B2B buying journey.⁶
- ▶ 60% of buyers say they prefer to research on their own, online.⁷
- ▶ 62% say they can now develop selection criteria or finalize a vendor list based solely on digital content.⁸

Many B2B marketers conclude that since three of the five journey steps involve consuming digital content, the business needs to create more and more digital content for the buyers to find as they build their knowledge. Marketers try to optimize content against organic search results or buy their way to the top of those search results, and even develop their own deep “learning” or “resource” centers in order to attract buyers looking for information.

But getting a return on these efforts has become more challenging over the last few years. The popularity of this approach has made just about every industry an unclimbable mountain of research, information, and education. In fact, research firm Gartner recently pointed out that B2B brands need to rethink their content marketing, saying:

“In a world where customers are struggling with too much information rather than not enough, the most successful marketers are focused on providing less information, specifically designed to make buying easier.”⁹

In summary, what is missing for today’s modern B2B marketer is not the creation of more information, but rather context on where and how to deliver different kinds of information. The classic goal is to deliver “the right message to the right person at the right time” – businesses have nailed the ability to do any one of the three, but not all three simultaneously.

Marketers must be able to understand where the buyer is on their intentional change journey. What is their actual intent? At least three of the five steps of intentional change involve searching, consumption, and assimilation of alternative points of view. But the context of the buyer’s intent is the most important thing for marketers to understand, because it is the only way marketers can provide the contextual (and differentiating) message that helps buyers make a decision.

So, what is the answer to understanding that context?

PART TWO:

CONTEXT IS CONTENT ENABLED WITH BETTER LISTENING

In order to build a B2B marketing system that can truly understand buyer intent, companies need to be able to build programs that enable their marketing and sales teams to listen more effectively for the signals being generated across the intentional change journey.

As one might expect, this means a much more effective use of data than is most likely available for most businesses.

Successful B2B companies that utilize targeted content and marketing data to listen for contextual signals get these results:

- ▶ Double their conversion rate ¹⁰
- ▶ Gain a 2%-5% percent bump in sales ¹¹
- ▶ Are 27% better at selling solutions ¹²

A content strategy is needed that provides data to help the business understand the type and purpose of each piece of content created and how it applies contextually to each step of the intentional change journey.

In our research and work with clients, we have seen B2B marketers find early success in applying a tiered approach to creating their thought leadership programs. Each thought leadership piece can begin to address intent signals by delivering specific value at a step along the intentional change journey.

A TIERED APPROACH TO CREATING THOUGHT LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS

INTENTIONAL CHANGE PROCESS STEP	THOUGHT LEADERSHIP/CONTENT THEME	EXAMPLES
Envisioning the ideal destination	“Why we change.” Industry and visionary leadership about change.	Thought leadership papers, events, and resources from influencers.
Exploring the gaps to get there	“The implications of change.” Practical needs and gap analysis.	Blog posts, labs, eBooks, podcasts providing peer-level “real-life” examples of making change.
Developing a learning agenda	“How we change.” Practical needs and “how-to” content.	Blogs, videos, or other practical “how-to” educational content.
Executing and practicing new habits	“What we do to change.” Specific customer case studies, thought leadership on easier buying process, free trials, prototypes, POCs.	Specific customer case studies, thought leadership on easier buying process, free trials, prototypes, POCs.
Getting support	“Making change successful.” Instructional and peer-driven support.	Customer communities and events.

B2B marketers can utilize a framework like the one in the table to better understand how the consumption of a particular kind of content can provide intent signals of where, contextually, the buyer is in their journey.

However, a problem remains for most B2B organizations. Where can we get this insight?

PART THREE:

A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING B2B INTENT WITH CONTENT-BASED MARKETING

There are two primary challenges for B2B marketers trying to understand trends in buyer intent. The first is that the number of buyers consuming most B2B content on websites, blogs, and other business-owned thought leadership platforms is inherently low. Most single companies can't generate enough traffic or content consumption to create broad statistical relevance. The content being consumed on any one company's site or blog is simply the result of which pieces are promoted, or is skewed by how search engine optimization has ranked the organic content for each step of the process.

The second challenge – related and even more common – is that companies can't generate the diversity and quantity of content needed across all the various areas. Further, the content they do have is rarely structured and tagged in such a way that the business can correlate intent with content consumption. Thus, the default is that every download (or form fill) is treated as having the same level of buying intent.

In our research and consulting practice with B2B marketing organizations, we've seen organizations create a self-enablement process that can begin to create this level of capability. We typically see a three-step process:

1. **Arrange the data house.** First, organizations need to create a metadata structure and content tagging system to track behavioral context as visitors read content.
2. **Develop best next capability.** Businesses need to create content-driven experiences in such a way that the “best next” experience can be delivered to content consumers. For example, when a buyer reads a “how to change” piece, you then want to automatically deliver an experience addressing the buyer's next step, “executing change.”

Similarly, provide this knowledge to the sales teams so that they can change their role from a “persuader” for the buyer to move to the next step, to a “consultant” on *how* to best move to the next step.

3. **Connect the experiences.** Once the ability to serve up the content contextually is established, the organization needs to find a way to connect the experiences into a singular view of the audience's progression through the intentional change journey.

The insight gleaned from a more statistically relevant data set improves these activities or even makes them possible in the first place.

PART FOUR:

CONTENT-BASED MARKETING PERFORMANCE / ANALYTICS PLATFORMS

In advertising – especially business-to-consumer (B2C) – targeting advertising means displaying advertising based on a consumer’s content consumption. This kind of advertising is typically almost 3X as effective as when it is not targeted.¹³

When targeted advertising evolves into a sophisticated practice, it goes beyond simply whether or not the consumer has visited the company’s website or searched for the company’s brand name. Media buyers understand the importance of behavioral data in their strategy, such as what channels customers have engaged with (even competitive websites, or social media experiences), what keywords they have searched for, and their attitudes about the kind of content they have consumed.

B2B marketers can borrow these intent signals as a critical piece of modern B2B marketing. Put simply: we can develop the data to better understand where the buyer is within their intentional change journey.

The challenge, as mentioned above, is that this is often hard to discern from a single company’s data. Media companies and specific solutions have begun to emerge that aggregate content across industries and multiple companies in a structured manner to help determine a B2B buyer’s level of intent with finer granularity. This can then be utilized to deliver a more valuable message to the buyer in the moment.

These platforms can provide for extraordinarily valuable insights across both content and the audiences consuming them. For example, marketers might start to imbue their content marketing capabilities with:

- ▶ **Industry research:** real-time information on which persona types within industry are consuming what kind of content – providing for macro trends of the kinds of solutions that may be needed.
- ▶ **Topic research:** access to the most popular topics at the three areas of audience intention, and the kinds of challenges that are most pressing as buyers assemble their learning agenda.
- ▶ **Competition performance:** assessment of which competitors are outperforming others in their content usage, and where there may be gaps in the intentional change journey that could be differentiating.
- ▶ **Audience intent signals:** triggers for individual companies (or even individuals) that are in the latter part of their intentional change process, providing for insight into sales or more transactional portions of the customer’s journey

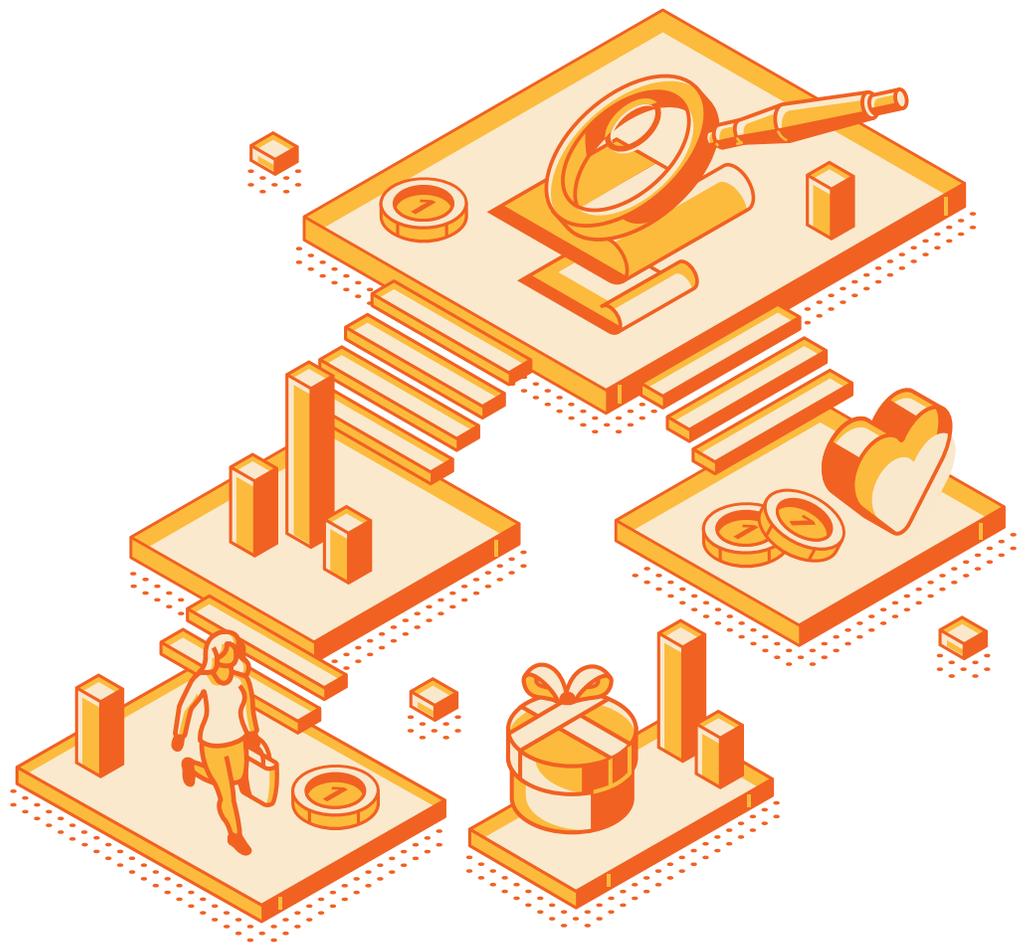
This information is a linchpin for bringing in contextual relevance, understanding the value of the content the marketing team is creating, and determining how to deliver the best next experience to buyers to differentiate their particular solutions.

CONCLUSION:

B2B BUYING IS ABOUT TRYING TO MINIMIZE CHANGE

Change efforts always require time and energy. One of the more widespread fallacies about the B2B marketing process is that we assume that buyers are looking for the biggest – or most fundamental - change to the solution they want to replace. It's not true.

While many B2B buyers have set a transformational vision, the intentional change journey is often simply exploring an incremental improvement. And in all cases, transformational or otherwise, the second and third steps in that five-step process are to assemble the roadmap that provides the least amount of disruption on the way to their intended future destination.



CONTENTGINE



CONTENT-BASED MARKETING

On behalf of Robert, the Content Marketing Institute, and our company, Contentgine, we hope you enjoyed this groundbreaking thought piece on content marketing in the age of intent.

Contentgine is the leader in content based marketing, providing content marketers with the first true content analysis tool, the Content Indication Platform, “CIP.” Our company markets over 500,000 business cases from 22,000 vendors via our Perpetual Engine methodology, and in the process provide our clients a wealth of first-person leads and a tool for gauging how their and the competition’s content is being consumed.

We can be found at: www.contentgine.com.

END NOTES

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