Guides Not Gurus

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The past quarter century has seen the deployment of ethnographic methods in business grow from a curiosity to a prerequisite for success. But in the process, the outcomes of ethnographic research—customer empathy, strategic directions, lasting market insights that shape design—have not been adopted at the same rate. The hand-off from ethnographers to designers and business decision-makers is the biggest challenge to success.

The time has come for ethnographers to again reframe their role within business. Rather than acting as interpreters between the lives of ordinary people and the companies who serve them, ethnographers have the opportunity to instead help the entire business organization to gather a clear sense of its customers' lives. Ethnographers need to switch from being gurus of customer experience to being guides who take everyone in the company into the outside world.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1990s, a group of senior executives from Mercedes-Benz realized that the company's out-sized success over the previous thirty years threatened to destroy it in the long term. They were concerned that Mercedes had become so closely associated with wealthy Baby Boomers that the brand might have trouble connecting with a new generation of drivers. In order to reach younger drivers, the company needed to reinvent itself. With that goal in mind, a group of twenty executives set out on a trip to San Francisco to meet with experts on innovation. As part of that trip, they invited a team from Jump Associates to join them for an afternoon.[1]

The meetings were held at the Fairmont, a luxurious hotel in San Francisco. As the team settled into their chairs, we ran them through a quick slide presentation to give an overview of Jump's work and our philosophy. To their tremendous surprise, we told them to forget about innovation. Their obstacle to success with younger Americans was not that the company's technological capabilities, which are world-class, nor their creativity. Instead, the

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[1] The Mercedes example, as well as that of the Nike Presto and Intel persona, are adapted in part from Mortensen's co-authored work *Wired to Care: How Companies Prosper When They Create Widespread Empathy*. FT Press.

challenge was that the company was trying to make cars for people they didn't know very well. Mercedes needed empathy, not innovation.

Our team then opened the conference room doors to introduce ten men and women from the Bay Area, all of whom were in their twenties. These folks had volunteered to spend time talking to Mercedes about who they were and what their lives were like. The Mercedes group would divide into teams of two. Each pair would spend time talking with one person. We asked each team to interview their participant and find out a little bit more about them. The goal was to get to know them as people. For their part, each young person had been asked to bring along photos of things that were important to them: their home, their friends, their passions. The teams had half an hour to find out more about the people they interviewed and hear some of the stories about their lives. After a half an hour, we closed the interviews and announced that it was time to start the second half of the workshop.

Each team of executives was given two hours, fifty dollars in cash, and a map of downtown San Francisco. Their assignment was simple: Purchase a gift for the person they just met. The activity was designed to show the executives how much they had learned about the people they had interviewed. After all, when you give a gift, it's both a reflection of who you are and who you understand the recipient to be. As such, team success would be evaluated on one simple criterion: how much their recipient liked the gift.

Two hours later, the teams returned with admittedly mixed results. Some teams came back with rather generic tourist knick-knacks, like plastic cable car toys and Golden Gate Bridge-emblazoned sweatshirts. When we asked them why they chose to buy mementos of San Francisco for people who live in San Francisco, they admitted that this hadn't occurred to them as a problem. One team came back with a bright red fanny pack, which similarly failed to thrill their 25-year-old participant.

Other teams fared much better. One group had met with a guy named Cam who, after years working for a big Silicon Valley technology firm, was gearing up to start his own business. Our execs bought him a book on entrepreneurship. They had a little money left over, which they tucked inside the front cover as a bit of seed money for the new venture. As they described why they thought Cam would like it, it was clear that they had come to know him surprisingly well. They described in detail what it felt like for Cam to struggle with the uncertainty in his life. A few of the other execs snickered at the extra twenty bucks inside the book, but the team insisted that, when you're starting out on your own, every little bit helps. Many of the other gifts turned out to be nice little encapsulations of the empathy that the teams had developed in a short period of time, too.

The point of the workshop was fairly straightforward. First, we wanted the Mercedes executives to meet some real-life young people. Second, we wanted to get them out on the streets of a major American city, absorbing information through all of their senses. But most importantly, we wanted them to start to think differently about the cars they made. You see,

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on some level, every product has to function like a gift—a physical manifestation of a relationship. It's both an embodiment of who the giver is and what they think of the receiver. When you get a great gift, you can't help but feel like the other person knows you on a deep level. When you get a lousy gift, you wonder if they even thought about you. The same is true for products. A great one makes you feel like someone out there gets who you really are. A lousy one makes you wonder what the company was thinking—or whether it even thought at all. Maybe the company was just regifting something that was originally intended for someone else. Our auto executives needed to make their cars into thoughtful gifts if they wanted younger customers to care about them in return.

The trip to San Francisco gave the Mercedes team a short glimpse into the lives of the people they wanted to sell to. But the team also walked away with personal memories of why it was important to pursue this business opportunity in the first place. They had met the young people they had previously only read about in research reports, and they had genuinely started to care about them as people. Moreover, they instituted an ethnography-driven process to develop a new generation of luxury vehicles for younger drivers.

TRANSFORMING ETHNOGRAPHERS FROM GURUS INTO GUIDES

In recent years, ethnography has become widely adopted within corporations, from technology to healthcare to food companies. When we say ethnography, though, what exactly what do we mean? As with the Mercedes example, there are new ways of thinking about ethnographic methods and the impact they can have in a business context that diverge a great deal from classic approaches.

Ethnography, defined as a study of/writing about culture, refers to any research practices that study behavior in a naturalistic context. The aim of ethnography is to document and understand how people actually live their lives. Ethnography in the service of developing new products, services or even businesses works by moving the research team into the actual contexts of people's lives to understand the patterns of people's needs and desires. In our experience consulting with large companies to create new businesses and reinvent existing categories, ethnography helps our clients to understand patterns of behavior and beliefs from the point of view of participants, not our own. At Jump, we don't call the people we study "consumers," "users," "customers," or even worse, "research subjects." We call them participants, because we are only able to learn through their active participation in our process. Without them, we'd be nowhere.

The range of specific ethnographic techniques we employ at Jump is broad. Observation, intensive interviewing, and contextual interviewing are some of the common field tasks we engage in. We go shopping at the grocery store with our participants, we drive around in their cars with them, and we peer into their refrigerators and closets. We're interested in not only what people do, but why. And, often, folks can't tell you why they do something. As ethnographers skilled in the art of observing and interviewing people in the

context of their everyday lives, we learn about their behaviors and beliefs through watching, asking, and listening for stories about what matters most to them. Through careful analysis, we bring forward our participants' unarticulated needs from the observations and interviews we collect in the field. Done right, ethnography can not only inform and inspire new product or service development but clarify patterns of thought and behavior to connect with strategic choices for our clients.

Our first challenge, legitimacy, has been overcome. Corporations, at least the ones who hire us, believe that ethnography is a worthwhile method for gaining insight into the lives of their customers. Now, however, we need to make the research stick and have a long-term impact beyond any individual project. And that's a big, hairy problem, for many reasons.

Executives and designers who don't go into the field often ignore research if it challenges their assumptions. And some companies may care more about what consumers think of their products than in understanding them as people. Clients all have ideas in their heads about what their customers look, sound, and act like. And it can be surprising to meet them face to face. We see behaviors, beliefs and attitudes that seem weird or aberrant that can often be the most insightful opportunity for our clients, as long as they're along for the ride. As humans we want to dismiss this behavior, but it can often lead to profound insights.

Ethnographic methods can be a tough sell for our clients—small sample sizes, expensive research plans and longer time frames for completion—but offer greater depth of insight. Many of our clients had been doing their innovation work through sheer luck and introspective ability. And for others it's hard to make sense of what might appear to be a contradictory jumble of opinions that may or may not synch up with what they know about customers from other, more statistically significant research. They've also had bad experiences translating ethnographic insights into action. They had fun doing ethnography along with the researchers, but got nothing lasting out of it. Consequently, they don't return for more.

At the same time, a loud chorus is saying ethnography can't do what it's supposed to in a business context. Anthropologists working in academia and other contexts have challenged the inherently proprietary nature of the work we do with corporate clients, and call us to either stop it or find better ways to communicate our work in the public realm. Others decry leading-edge research methods as a gross subversion of true ethnography. Then there are designers who say ethnography doesn't help them. As Don Norman has noted, ethnography doesn't tell you where to put the buttons.[2] As well, there are the finance guys who say the return on investment is never high enough. They question whether all this research activity really leads to success in the marketplace. Any and all of these might be a threat to our burgeoning field.

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[2] Don Norman (2008) criticizes "exploratory" ethnography in "Workarounds and Hacks: The Leading Edge of Innovation".

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To take business ethnography to the next level, we need to reframe our role by focusing the outcomes to give clients real value. And that's true even if that means broadening the definition of ethnography or creating new methods for developing empathy with participants. To help ethnography occupy a strategic role in business, ethnographers need to become guides for helping their clients discover consumer insights, instead of gurus who know more about people than anyone else. And we must find ways to communicate our value across our client organizations. Unless product developers have the same understanding as we do, they'll toss the research. Unless executives feel the opportunities we identify, they'll ignore them. And unless insight spreads widely throughout organizations, the impact of ethnography is ultimately blunted. To thrive over the long term, ethnographers need to become guides, not gurus. Here's our five-step plan to make it happen.

1. Get decision-makers to the gemba.
2. Teach clients about their most interesting customers, not the best ones.
3. Be your own guinea pig.
4. Reinforce your clients' good behavior.
5. Choose the right medium for your message.

FIVE PRINCIPLES TO MAKE ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH HAVE HIGHER IMPACT

Get Decision-Makers to the Gemba

Like few people in business, ethnography practitioners know the immense value of going to the gemba, a Japanese word for "the actual place." What good ethnography provides, more than anything else, are vivid pictures of real people as they are, instead of what they appear to be when abstracted into market research data. So much of what people do on an everyday basis is implicit. Only deep empathy can help us to understand what people truly value, instead of which products they like. Unfortunately, the difference isn't easy to detect when you're getting the information secondhand. Worse, skeptics tend to distrust any research findings that aren't validated through extensive polling of thousands of people, rather than the 12 to 20 needed for great ethnographic research. Again and again, ethnographers get asked: How do we know that what you saw with these people goes on with everyone else? We bring up the Cultural Consensus Model,[3] but it's rarely enough to instill lasting confidence in skeptics.

The only way to get skeptics to overcome their inherent concerns about ethnography's validity is to expand access to the real world. Rather than venturing alone into the field and reporting back, ethnographers can increase their influence by bringing a client team into the

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[3] We make frequent use of Romney et al's (1986) Cultural Consensus Model of informant competence, as well as its baseball analogy.

field to experience things for themselves. Don't just go to the gemba, take your clients there with you. Sure, they might not be as skilled in interviewing, and they'll need more time to come up with insights, but that's not the point. What an extended project team made up of clients and consultants gains is a collection of stories that shapes how they view their goals—and even how they sort through trade-offs during tough decision-making. The point of such work is not for clients to do great ethnography; it's for them to get a gut feel for ordinary people. The results can be amazing.

Back in the late 1990s, Nike's Explore innovation team was tasked with finding significant new businesses that the company could enter beyond its core in performance athletic gear. One of the most obvious directions that Nike could pursue was fashion. Many people enjoyed wearing shoes and clothing designed for sports as a casual change of pace. The team saw tremendous potential in this market and considered it one of the most promising opportunities Nike could develop. The company had a world-class brand and an enormous community of enthusiasts who treated its motto, "Just do it," as a slogan for how they live. It should have been a big win with minimal risk.

But things are never that easy. The word fashion was anathema to the culture at the company. If a product didn't embody athletic performance, it wasn't for Nike. Period. Knowing this, the team looked outward for inspiration. Though steeped in ethnography, they chose a different sort of observational learning—a cultural immersion. They would go to the gemba. From the top-level managers to researchers and engineers, the whole team started visiting college campuses to understand what was going on with students, whose tastes provide early indicators for trends both for adults and teens. As one of the team's leaders, Dave Schenone, recounts, the most interesting thing that his team noticed once it got outside of Nike's corporate campus in Beaverton, Oregon, was the shoes that students were wearing – or rather, what they weren't wearing. Big, baggy jeans were in at the time, so it was impossible to see sneakers or other modest shoes. As a result, college kids were going for extremely bold options like big, heavy Doc Martens boots.

This is a pretty big insight—that shoes are badges of personal expression, but normal sneakers were staying in the closet because they weren't eye-catching enough. And as the team recognized, making a shoe bigger isn't the only way to make it more visible. If Nike were to make a line of shoes in bold, flashy colors, they could be an ideal choice for campus wear – and everywhere wear, too. Color can express your personality, and the motion of your stride would variously expose and conceal a more bold side of yourself as you walked. Even better, the shoe could be designed to support both running and walking. As the team thought of it, this would be a shoe that you could wear to class in the morning, lace up for a two-mile run in the afternoon, and then make an impression at a party in the evening. The shoe that emerged, called the Presto (it came in eight "magical colors"), was an enormous success, and not just with college students. Many long-time Nike fans who had worn the company's shoes for years began to buy three or four colors of Presto to wear with different outfits.

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But more than being a hit, the product line opened the door for fashion at Nike. The team's experience in the field helped executives to see that there was a clear market for gear that could cross categories between life and sports. Presto proved you could make a fashion-forward shoe that was a performance running shoe at the same time. The new category inaugurated by Presto, Sport Culture, has now grown to become one of Nike's largest product categories, offering everything from stylish shoes to casual everyday clothes and even limited edition sneakers designed by artists. But if the project's managers had been told about the insights secondhand, they might never have bought into the validity of the concept. Taking decision-makers, not just researchers, to the gemba has enormous power to speed change and increase the influence of ethnography.

Teach Clients about Their Most Interesting Customers, Not the Best Ones

Human-centered approaches to innovation are often criticized for leading to incremental products and services. In the eyes of many, doing any work that involves talking to ordinary people is inherently vulnerable to the innovator's dilemma. Often, this happens because of the groups that clients ask ethnographers to study. Since companies pay careful attention to the people who pay their bills, they typically ask for research that looks into the lives of their best customers: the demographics who buy the most products from them, or desirable new customers who have the most spending power. Unfortunately, aiming for the mainstream of any group will inevitably yield incremental ideas.

A superior approach to leveraging ethnography through innovation is to look to the edges. Don't just study your best customers—study the most interesting ones. Look for people with needs ahead of the rest of us whose lives offer a look at what we might become – or exaggerate characteristics we all have that are less evident. This is a commonly understood idea, but it is rarely used to make the case for ethnography as a source of long-term innovations. When you help senior executives to meet customers who are far outside the lines of a typical demographic breakdown, it requires them to think differently about their business and what people truly value. We witnessed this effect firsthand during a recent project with Harley-Davidson.

In 2007, Jump worked with Harley-Davidson on a strategy to drive new value from its brand community. It had worked before: Harley's turn-around in the early 1980s was built upon strong connections with motorcycle riders. Instead of just making products and seeing if people liked them, the company opened its doors and made loyal riders the core of its growth strategy. But twenty-five years later, that core demographic had grown about as much as it could. Baby Boomers weren't buying bikes as frequently, and younger people weren't naturally gravitating to the brand. Unless Harley found ways to connect to new consumers beyond the core market, it faced irrelevance in the short term. Jump was brought in to turn the brand community upside-down and inside-out to see its real potential. We

knew that it would be critical to find a new model for brand engagement—including the structure of community interactions and the roles that people could play within them.

In order to establish credibility within the organization, the project included ethnographies of some existing core Harley riders. They told stories about their lives and discussed their involvement in the Harley brand community. But understanding these folks was only enough to maintain and evolve the core. We also took a trip to a major motorcycle rally and did intercepts to find out who actually makes the trek for such an event. As it turns out, many people in attendance were way outside of Harley's customer segmentation. There was the man who traveled the country with his cockatoo, frequently ending up at events across the country where his bird helped him to connect with people. There were the college kids who had come from hundreds of miles away to see what all the fuss was about. And there was even the group of real-life rail-riding travelers who took freight trains from city to city in order to find the most interesting scene. All of them fascinating folks, all of them very different, and all of them interested in being a part of the dream that Harley-Davidson promised.

Given the success that Harley-Davidson has enjoyed over the past several decades by connecting closely with existing motorcycle riders, it would be all too easy for the company to maintain a laser-like focus on its existing customers. But that could hurt the organization given time. In order to remain vital over the long term, Harley needs to understand the full spectrum of people who are affected by the company's business, from young couples to freight-train stowaways. Because our research so drastically broke the model of who a Harley-Davidson stakeholder is and what their lives are like, the company was able to begin thinking differently about how it could serve the members of its community. And as a result, the firm's relationship to the outside world was strengthened, made healthier, and grew their community.

Be Your Own Guinea Pig

Often times, as we begin to delve into issues that matter to our clients' customers, we forget that our own needs are not so different from theirs. Experiencing what consumers experience firsthand can give us, and by extension our clients, a window into their needs. If the client is a bank trying to design a new checking account, we go to a couple of other banks and open accounts with them to understand the experiences. If the client is a food company trying to develop products and programs for people who want to lose weight, we suggest everyone on the client and research team on a diet themselves. The team's experiences might not be 'typical,' but the team can still learn from them. In fact, the team will learn what customers experience at a deep emotional and visceral level, which might even be more valuable than learning through participant interviews. To make guinea pig experiments most helpful to inform product development, encourage the team to document their observations and emotions, paying special attention to things that frustrate, excite, confuse or delight. And don't just do it by yourself. Having an entire team go through the experience will help identify patterns that you can learn from.

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When we were working on a project that was focused on getting people to eat more vegetables, the team needed insight around what motivates people to eat more healthfully. Everyone on the team decided to take a 'veggie challenge,' eating the FDA recommended five servings a day for a week and keeping a food diary to track how successful we'd been. To our great surprise, we all struggled to eat five servings of vegetables a day. Some team members found that they were replacing fruit and other healthful foods with vegetables just to keep up. Based on this guinea pig experiment, the team decided to stay away from a daunting, hard-to-achieve five-a-day message and focused instead on sending a more positive, achievable message about eating fresher and more flavorful foods. Had we not tried it ourselves, we might have stuck with the five-a-day message and lost customers in the process. Only by making ourselves the guinea pigs could we reach this level of insight.

Reinforce Your Clients' Good Behavior

Ethnographers make the greatest impact when they help clients to change how they think and behave. This can come across as scolding: don't do this, change this message, scrap this product line and begin another. And while telling a corporate client that they need to stop working as they have is certainly valuable, people are far more eager to change when the request is phrased as positive reinforcement. Instead of telling companies to stop doing the thoughtless things that aggravate their customers or telling them all the things they don't do that they should, it can be far more valuable to reinforce the good things they already do. Quite often, companies don't realize which things that they do have real value for people in the world. Ethnographers can bring about tremendous change just by helping their clients to understand how to do more of the value-added activities they perform today.

Doing that requires a deeper level of empathy for the client than is required to define the requirements for a new product or even family of products. It's about truly assessing your clients' strengths and understanding how they could be reapplied to meet different sets of people's real needs. The best way to do this begins the same way as any other ethnographic project. First, observe people as they go about their daily lives, whether at home, work, or play. Then, go find a way to observe people using your clients' products, services, or other offerings as they do in real life. Sometimes, that's no different from the initial observation—any home-cleaning products would certainly function this way. At others, this entails finding another location, and some times other participants. If you're working with a retail client, you might end up spending as much time just watching how the store operates and intercepting shoppers as they go about their business. The key here is to understand the underlying frames that guide the behavior of the people you're studying to figure out why they have chosen your client's offerings as the preferred solution to their needs. The reason is often surprising—and usually far off the radar of corporations.

Several years ago, a Jump team was working with Target on a variety of projects to take the shopping experience to the next level. We realized after a few projects that we couldn't

merely improve the department by department. We needed a vision of the ideal state Target could offer its guests. Rather than just make up something cool, we decided to find out if Target already represented something that this larger vision could embody. Sure, it was obvious that people went to "Tar-zhay" for something a little nicer than they could find at Wal-Mart, but people don't stand by a company that stands for "slightly nicer." There had to be a more profound emotional need being met.

So we looked at the stories of the people we met in Target stores. And we were amazed that almost no one was there just to do their routine shopping. Many of them were purchasing a few staples for the house, but no one said that such sundries had gotten them out of their homes and into the store. Instead, they had all come in search of community. Moms were showing up on Tuesday nights together to shop for their kids but also enjoy a night out. Women in their 20s were getting together on Friday night for a girls' night out to catch up and buy a few things along the way. And fathers were showing up, kids in tow, on rainy Saturdays in search of family fun when the park just wasn't an option. This was really something. As Target had transformed what a discount retailer could be through design, the company's store guests were slowly converting it into a de facto community center—a new public square. One woman even told us that she shopped at Target because, when she was divorcing her husband, she felt "so weird and so crazy that I would go to Target three times a week just to be around other people who looked like me."

And from then on, when we worked with Target, we didn't just consider the unmet needs of the company's guests or how to create the best possible shopping experience in a particular category of goods. Instead, we worked toward the vision of Target as public square. In order to create a sustainable source of value, it was far more important to discover what big need the existence of Target fulfilled for people—and then help the company figure out how to do more of what they were already good at. And that's a point of differentiation that Wal-Mart and Kmart can never compete with by shaving another quarter of a penny off the price of a bottle of Tide. More, it has given Target a mission that makes the people who work for the company fired up to make an impact on the people they serve. It was a change that employees embraced easily, because it reminded them of the positive reasons they had chosen to work for Target in the first place. And that's why Target doesn't flip to trying to match Wal-Mart's prices, at the first sign of a recession. People count on them to provide community and a pleasant place to do the business of their life. They can't let them down.

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Choose the Right Medium for Your Message

Even in ethnography, the medium is the message. Too often, the medium is a PowerPoint, hundreds of hours of video or lengthy reports that send the message that it's for experts only. And that's a bad message. To increase the spread and influence of insights from ethnography, adopt media that people want to engage with—or that they have to. Using an ethnographer's keen eye, you can study your clients to understand how information travels inside their organization, and design your deliverables to fit into the way people do things. That way, the insight doesn't live in a report; it lives in the everyday interactions of the way people work.

One way to ensure the impact of our deliverable is to tie it to another object that always has a routine associated with it. Like many folks working in a corporate world, we had a client whose secretive office environment necessitated everyone to wear a lanyard and key badge to access their workspace. We looked for ways to build our deliverable—a set of strategic imperatives that should be applied across their work—into the client team's culture. One of our clients had a great idea, to attach the strategic imperatives to the team's badges. With their strategic imperatives attached to a lanyard card, one that's always with you in an office where you need it all the time, they were able to talk about the work no matter where they were. The lanyard card served as a constant reminder of what they were working toward.

We came across another good method for making ethnographic insights an everyday part of work several years ago while visiting Tony Salvador, a design ethnographer at Intel. He and the other ethnographers in his group have as strong a sense as anyone on the planet for how people are living with and, especially, interacting with technology. To reach the rest of the organization, the ethnography group translates what it learns about people into end-user personas, fictional people whose demographics, personality traits, and habits are based on those of the real people the team met. Such personas can provide touchstones in the product development process, but they wouldn't have any impact at Intel unless people read them. That's why Intel's ethnography group has created a unique method for spreading personas throughout the organization. The team has hit upon one of the rare moments when people sit down and have some time to themselves: in the bathroom. Intel posts the personas inside restroom stalls, where they're easy to access and read. After all, people are going to spend time there anyway. Why not help them learn something in the process?

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Today ethnography has more attention in business than ever before. But that attention does not translate directly into influence. In order for ethnography to fully realize its potential to transform companies' understanding of their customers, and the role their products and services play in those lives, it's quite possible that we need to reframe our role. This shift in role demands that we as ethnographers let go of our expertise. By relinquishing

our tight hold on the methods and dissemination of customer insight, we enable our clients, and by extension, our work, to chart new trajectories of impact. If you love something, set it free.

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