From Mediocre to Marvellous: Social Media Strategy to Improve the Student Experience at the University of Western Australia

Abstract

The focus on the student experience within the Australian higher education sector is more important than ever. The proposed shake up in university and student funding arrangements, increased competition from private providers and the proliferation in online courses means that a high quality student experience is a key factor in the decision of how and where to study. In this changing environment it is critical that libraries have the agility to innovate quickly, but strategically, and play a key role in the high quality student experience.

At the University of Western Australia Information Services, which comprises library and information technology services, has planned and implemented a range of new and improved services to enhance the student experience. This includes the repurposing of library spaces and service points, a campaign to communicate the improvement of services based on student feedback, a new model for improved student IT support and the development of a strategy for social media engagement.

This paper will focus on the development and implementation of a social media strategy in the context of these initiatives. The social media strategy was formulated via a survey of academic libraries in the world's top 100 universities, student feedback, and analysis tools, such as Facebook Insights. The aim of the strategy is to improve student engagement by promoting resources and services more effectively and enhancing the library and IT image, while at the same time continually measuring and evaluating social media usage to ensure ongoing return on investment. The strategy includes a content plan, guidelines for content authors, resourcing requirements, promotion and most importantly, evaluation and review.

Within the first few months of implementation the amount of student engagement via social media doubled. In addition, potential new services, such as services to support researchers' use of social media and collaboration with other sections of the university to enhance the student experience, have been identified. This has led to the need to up skill staff, the creation of new teams to author content for social media platforms and monthly reporting on social media channels, all within existing resources. The ongoing review and improvement of social media is central to the ongoing success of the strategy.

If academic libraries are to remain relevant in the changing higher education environment continual planning, innovation, evaluation and change are critical. The development of a social media strategy is an example of how planning and strategy can ensure library services remain relevant and effective.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper outlines the development and implementation of a social media strategy at the University of Western Australia Library. In order to encourage active student participation and establish social media accounts as valuable communication channels, the development of the strategy involved gathering user feedback and reviewing analytics. Since implementation of the strategy, there has been a significant increase in engagement on the UWA Library student media channels leading to increased promotion and awareness of library services.

CONTEXT

In recent years, the student experience has been a growing priority in the Australian higher education sector. Increasing competition from open online courses, overseas and the private sector has necessitated a shift towards community building, the adoption of new technologies and skills, and an acknowledgement of the need for students to play an active and engaged role in their learning and overall university experience. At the University of Western Australia (UWA), this emphasis on the student experience has translated into a new vision for student teaching and learning entitled 'Education Futures' (University of Western Australia, 2014). The vision emphasises the need for a vibrant campus environment and both formal and informal activities to enhance the student experience.

The student experience has been a priority for the UWA Library for some time with new services and facilities implemented regularly to improve student satisfaction. Despite this, feedback suggested that students were unaware of these initiatives (InSync Surveys Pty Ltd, 2012). It was obvious that while the Library had a number of ways to listen to users, the communication methods being used were not effective. Upon consideration, a number of issues were identified including that library messages were unappealing to students, communications were static, and opportunities for user engagement were being missed.

As a result, a working group was established in early 2013 with the remit to coordinate communications, marketing and promotions across the department (consisting of six subject library sites), developing communication plans for new services, and maintaining client-facing websites, signage and publications. This group introduced a number of successful marketing activities, including a 'You Said, We Did' campaign, a 'Mystery Shopping' exercise and promotional screensavers.

Students at UWA are increasingly engaging with online tools and social media, both socially and for teaching and learning purposes. This is strongly reflected in the UWA Networking Online to Diversify Engagement (NODE) Survey (Cluett, 2013). This trend was also reflected in the popularity of a UWA Students Facebook page set up by UWA Student Services. Facebook and Twitter accounts had been set up for the UWA Library in 2010, however these accounts were poorly used and suffering from the same issues as other communications, as well as staff departure, lack of resources and an organisational restructure which amalgamated the Library and IT sections into one department (Information Services) and resulted in the accounts having to be rebranded. With this in mind, the working group began an activity to try to revitalise the existing social media accounts and transform them into valuable communication channels by developing and implementing a social media strategy.

STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

The development of the UWA Library Social Media Strategy was based on three significant pieces of work; a survey of libraries in the world's top universities which included an environmental scan, an informal UWA student survey and analysis of Facebook and Twitter usage.

Survey of world's top universities

The development of the social media strategy commenced in early 2013 with a survey of libraries in the world's top 100 universities in order to explore their Facebook and Twitter use, including level of activity, popularity, and integration with other services such as reference (Benn & McLoughlin, 2013). Based on the survey results the UWA experience with Facebook and Twitter was not unlike the experience in many other libraries worldwide with a particular emphasis on the need for planning. Benn and McLoughlin (2013) found that as reported in various studies and surveys (Wan, 2011, Steiner, 2012) planning for social media is often neglected. Although an initial policy to guide UWA Library use of social media was written in 2010, social media accounts had been set up and then basically left to languish through lack of planning, commitment and review. The survey of libraries in the world's top 100 universities provided a useful starting point for strategy development.

Informal UWA student survey

In addition to the survey of libraries in the world's top 100 universities, in September 2013, 432 UWA students were informally surveyed about their preferences in regards to Library communications (referred to as Information Services or IS due to the combined Library/IT department). There were a number of specific social media questions included in the survey which provided an opportunity to utilise student feedback in the development of the social media strategy and ensure that the accounts were appealing and relevant. One of the main findings from the informal survey of students was that 88% of respondents were unaware that the Library had a Facebook page and 94% unaware that the Library was on Twitter. As a result of this feedback, a section on promotion was included in the strategy and funding was made available for these purposes to be spent on paid promotion in Facebook and a competition at the beginning of each Semester.

Facebook and Twitter analytics

The existing Facebook and Twitter accounts also provided rich analytics data about the impact of previous efforts. A review of previous posts to the UWA Library social media accounts revealed that content was predominately advertising IT outages and faults with minimal 'good news' stories being posted. Whilst advertising IT outages and scheduled maintenance was important, the negative lasting impression being given by the accounts was that nothing ever worked in the libraries, when of course, it was quite the opposite. A review of Facebook analytics revealed that the posts that had generated the most interest were an O Day photo competition, a microfilm artwork created by a library staff member, a new information resource and a lost bobtail lizard that found its way into one of the library buildings. This provided an insight into the content which users found to be interesting.

After reviewing the survey results and formulating an initial scoping document, it was apparent that there were six issues to be considered in the development of a social media strategy. These included audience, tools for impact, content management, staff development, and integration with other services.

STRATEGY SUCCESS

In November 2013, the social media strategy was developed, approved and implemented immediately. The strategy covers staffing, content, promotion and monitoring and review.

At the time of developing the social media strategy in October 2013, the UWA Information Services Facebook page had 454 'likes'. The graph below shows the increase in followers on the social media platforms before and after the implementation of the social media strategy. The strategy was particularly focused on increasing engagement on Facebook as the Twitter channel was already performing relatively well in comparison with other academic libraries. In addition, the informal survey of students found they were more likely to use Facebook. Based on this it was particularly pleasing to see the rapid increase in followers on Facebook which can be credited to the implementation of the four main elements of the social media strategy.
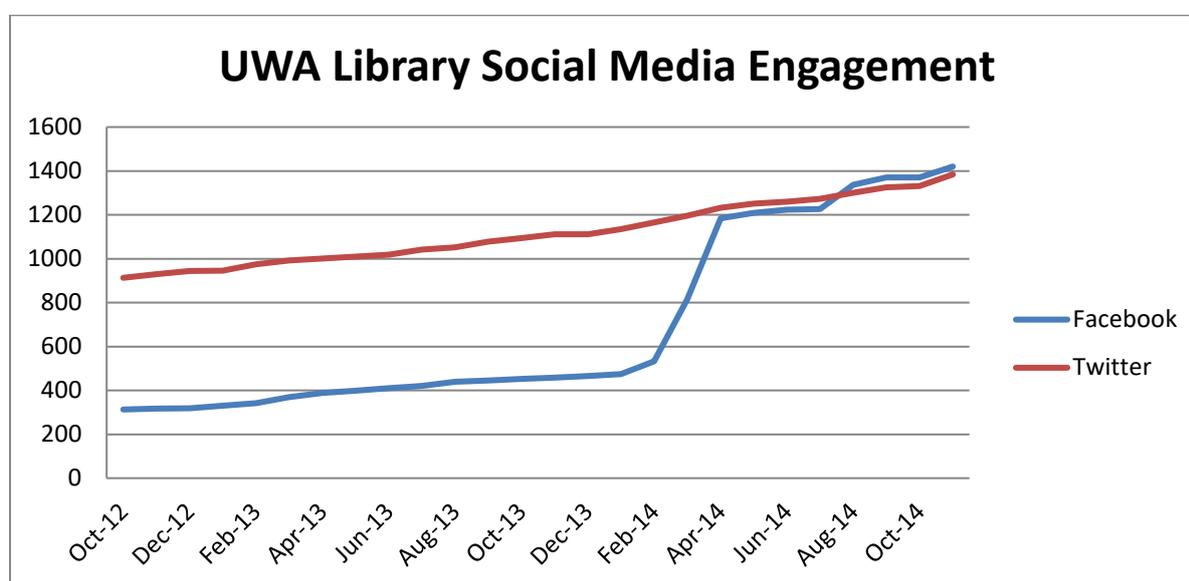

Figure 1: UWA Library Social Media Engagement graph showing growth of followers on Facebook and Twitter accounts from October 2012 to October 2014. The graph was created using Facebook Insights and Twitter Analytics data.

Content plan

As found in the survey by Benn and McLoughlin (2013), frequency of posting has a correlation with engagement. Increasing the frequency of posts was a key part of implementing the strategy and a content plan was created to assist with this. Before the implementation of the social media strategy, UWA Library staff posted to Facebook on average 10 times each month. The average from November 2013 to August 2014 was 26 posts per month.

Content is carefully planned in a shared Outlook calendar to ensure it is spread evenly across the week. It was found that photographs increased the engagement with the content

so almost every post now includes an image. There are two "series" of content posts for 2014; "Reid Library 50 Facts" to tie in with the building's 50th anniversary and weekly highlights from the Library's rare and special collections.

The content planning calendar is also used to plan ahead for events and key dates in the student calendar to ensure posts are timely and relevant. For example, following the Jessup Moot team as they prepare in the Law Library over the summer break, the examination period and the opening of a local hospital named after a UWA alumni.

Staffing

The study undertaken by Benn and McLoughlin (2013) found that dedicated social media staffing is one of the most important factors for social media success. The social media strategy recommended the establishment of a social media team for the UWA Library consisting of a number of staff. A team of four was deemed necessary to monitor the accounts so that student queries could be responded to in a timely manner, frequent interesting content could be created and to ensure accounts remained active during staff absences. Reporting in to the Library's Marketing and Communication Team, the social media team includes a combination of a library manager, specialized student IT support staff, a web analyst and front line service point staff. Recently this team expanded in numbers to assist with increasing engagement.

Promotion

At the time of writing this paper, there were 109 Facebook pages with a link to UWA, ranging from 12 followers for UWA Organisational Staff Development Services to 28,292 followers for the official UWA page. With 159,168 total followers and so many pages, UWA Library was struggling to have its key messages heard through all the noise. As a result, two forms of promotion were included in the strategy; paid promotion and competitions designed to increase the number of followers.

In Semester 1, the competition took the form of a 'Student Survival Pack' giveaway consisting of a plastic tub filled with a range of items including noodles, Red Bull, coffee and a $50 bookshop voucher. The hamper was displayed on library service points and taken to Orientation sessions to promote both the competition and the social media accounts. This competition ran from 17th February to 17th March and during this time period, the Facebook page gained 593 new followers.

The Semester 2 Competition was a 'mystery book' competition. This involved a book hidden in the collection and cryptic clues being released on Facebook at random across the week. The first student to solve the clues and find the book won a $50 Co-Op Bookshop voucher. This competition ran from 28th July to 10th August and during this time period, the UWA Library Facebook account gained 94 new followers.

The two social media competitions required significant preparation involving shopping for hamper content, writing and lodging terms and conditions with the Department of Racing, Gaming and Liquor, developing clues, and monitoring the competition's progress. On the

other hand, each competition only cost $150 and the excitement and engagement that resulted was worth the effort.

The other form of promotion used in 2014 was paid reach. UWA Library used the CPM (cost per 100 impressions) method as opposed to CPC (cost per click). Across the year, UWA Library spent a total budget of $276 on 7 Facebook ad campaigns. The average cost per post engagement was $0.23, average reach 6,792, and there was an average 387 engagements per post. Figure 2 shows the seven campaigns and the corresponding page/post likes. The next section on analytics explores these promoted posts in more detail.
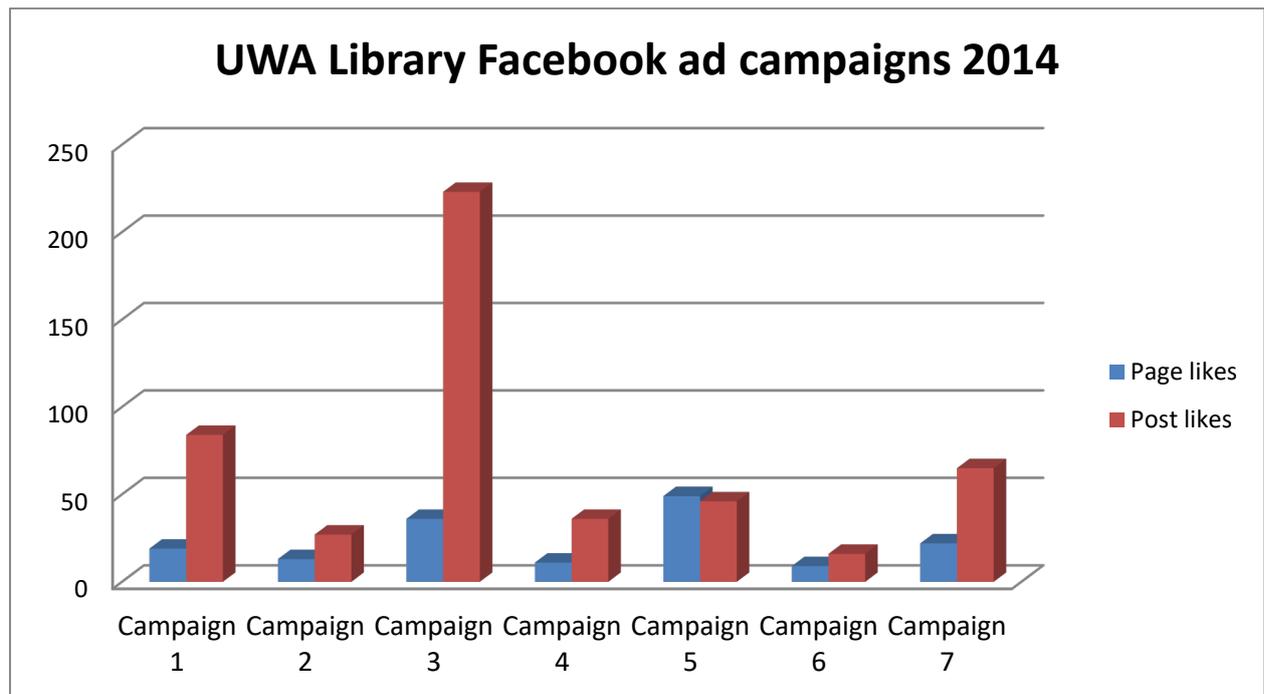

Figure 2: Graph showing the number of page and post likes resulting from the seven UWA Library Facebook ad campaigns in 2014. The graph was created using Facebook Insights data.

Analytics

The strategy had an emphasis on continual monitoring and review. It recommended that monthly analytics reports be provided to Senior Management to allow for ongoing monitoring of engagement levels and an indication of the success of the new content. There was also provision included for an annual review to be carried out to ensure that the accounts are still relevant to clients, create engagement and are a worthwhile return on investment of staff time.

As part of the social media strategy, analytics were reviewed on a monthly basis with interesting results and trends emerging. For example, as to be expected the ten posts with the highest lifetime post total reach on Facebook included seven boosted posts as shown in Figure 3.

Post	Lifetime post total reach (as at 26th October 2014)	Engagement rate
Semester 2 FB competition announcement	10,516 (boosted)	4%
Reid Library Memory Catalogue	10,212 (boosted)	1%
Semester 1 FB competition announcement	8,580 (boosted)	12%
New ChargeBars	7,972 (boosted)	7%
Reid Library entrance door artwork	7,644 (boosted)	7%
Reid Library extended opening hours	6,196 (boosted)	6%
Lecture Capture System outage	5,890	18%
Photo of Queen Elizabeth II outside Reid Library in 60s	4,584 (boosted)	6%
Opening of Fiona Stanley Hospital	2,241	15%
Plastic ducks in Reid Library moat	1,626	24%

Figure 3: Table showing the top ten Facebook posts in 2014 by lifetime post total reach. This table was created using Facebook Insights data.

However, it became apparent through analysis of the data that the paid Facebook promotion increased the visibility of the post but did not necessarily increase the engagement. The boosted posts in Figure 3 show engagement rates ranging from 1% to 12%. When compared to the posts with the highest engagement rates (Figure 4), it can be seen that the top post about a visit to the library by the campus pig was seen by only 162 followers but 80% of them engaged with the post in some way.

Post	Lifetime post total reach (as at 26th October 2014)	Engagement rate
Macca the Pig	162	79%
EDFAA Library flood photos	1,207	35%
Semester 2 competition clue #2	665	35%
Reid Library new furniture photos	889	32%
Semester 2 competition clue #1	636	31%
Semester 2 competition winner	879	31%
Fog on campus	984	29%
Refurbishment announcement	250	28%
Centenary gift painting from Friends of the Library	147	27%
Reid Library closure announcement	586	27%

When compared to the Facebook Insights data, the Twitter Analytics revealed different results. As shown by Figure 5, the tweets with the highest engagement rates were historical throwbacks and highlights from Special Collections, whilst the same posts on Facebook received minimal engagement.

Tweet	Date	Engagement rate
50 years of #UWA Reid Library, now barely visible from Winthrop Tower due to the growth of Tropical Grove's canopy http://t.co/dE6mgb92N8	2014-08-28	16
We love this time of year so much that we've created a book spine poem to share our excitement! http://t.co/yS0QckJCJI	2013-12-18	12
Did you know that Reid Library used to have a library cat? In the 90s a small black cat called Cosmo used to visit http://t.co/K21GgnRH3v	2014-09-04	12
Thanks @pat_loria @lbejder @kimbowa @snet_jklump @tamaleaver @supervisingdiss, Helen Cripps & @CurtinLibrary for a great #wagulrd2014	2014-07-22	11
Due to popular demand, we've installed ChargeBars in every subject library! You'll never run out of battery again! http://t.co/LbRrljgz81	2014-01-10	10
When Reid Library opened in 1964 there was a loan limit of 3 books per reader. It's now 30 for undergraduates in 2014 http://t.co/PMabNlrgdx	2014-07-11	10
The smallest book in #UWA Reid Library's Special Collection: Dante's Divina Commedia published in Milan in 1878 http://t.co/QQFlbowhrg	2014-06-05	9
Oldest book in #UWA Reid Library's Special Collections: the Formulary of English Chancery writs in Latin (c. 1350). http://t.co/d9Hoj1VOCt	2014-06-19	8
The old-style red cast iron pillar box outside the Reid Library was made by J & E Ledger, ancestors of Heath Ledger. http://t.co/tufyWLzcmh	2014-03-06	7
Tomorrow marks 4 years since #UWA EDFAA Library suffered flood damage. Check out these incredible before/after pics! http://t.co/fX831mVbV7	2014-03-21	7

LESSONS LEARNT

A number of key lessons were learnt post implementation of the strategy; they are summarised under the five themes below.

1. Followers v following

Facebook constantly fine-tunes the algorithms that determine what content is seen by page followers. Whilst the specifics of this algorithm are not publicly available, it is generally understood that the more a user engages with content on a page, the more content from that page is pushed to their newsfeed. Vice versa, if a user doesn't engage with a few posts in a

row, Facebook will gradually make that page's content essentially invisible to that user. When the social media strategy was first implemented, the focus was very much on increasing the number of followers on the UWA Library accounts as a way to increase the audience for key messages. However, this approach changed half-way through the year when it was realized that there could be a huge audience consisting of thousands of followers who don't even see the content. As a result, the approach shifted from encouraging engagement to fostering continual engagement.

2. Strategy not stability

At the time it was developed, the UWA Library social media strategy was designed for 2014-2016. It soon became apparent that a social media strategy needs to be organic and to develop along with a social media account and its followers. Just as Facebook constantly changes its algorithms, the UWA Library needs to keep revisiting and revising the strategy and content plan to ensure that followers became a 'following'. For example, upon realisation of the popularity of posts about ducks and peacocks, these posts were more regularly scattered throughout the social media calendar to break up more serious posts about outages or new services.

3. Things can change in an instant

On 1st September 2014, the University Library became a separate entity from IT Services due to an organisational restructure. The social media accounts featured prominently in the communication plan as a way of disseminating key messages and updates about the change. Despite previously being shared accounts for the combined division, it was decided that the University Library would retain them. This required rebranding which happened relatively quickly without any detrimental impact on the accounts reflects one of the advantages of using social media to communicate with users.

4. Paid promotion isn't the only way

The social media strategy identified the need for promotion, and paid promotion and competitions were explored with varying levels of success. However, throughout the year it became apparent that cross-promotion was another valuable method. In fact, one post that was shared by the official University of Western Australia Facebook page recorded more views than some of the promoted posts. Once UWA Library staff began engaging as 'UWA Library' with other UWA Facebook and Twitter accounts, these pages began engaging back and many followers from these pages subsequently followed the Library accounts. Recently, collaboration commenced with other pages run by departments in the UWA Education Portfolio with the aim of creating joint content, removing any potential duplication across the pages by sharing plans, and promoting each other's key messages.

5. Don't fear failure

Perhaps the biggest social media lesson learnt was to not fear failure. Failure is almost inevitable when trying new things and UWA Library's implementation of the new social media strategy was certainly not without its little hiccups which ranged from content that fell

flat, to Facebook deleting a competition post along with all the entrants. However, these so-called 'failures' were not really seen as failures at all but rather as learning experiences and UWA Library staff spent the year learning how UWA staff and students responded to the different types of content and competitions. For example, the first Semester competition was popular and successful and it would have been easy to simply run the same competition a second time, but UWA Library staff experimented with a different kind of competition for Semester 2. Whilst the Semester 2 competition did not translate into followers, it encouraged more engagement and was successful in its own way. It also demonstrated that the kind of content/competition that appeals to one university community doesn't necessarily appeal to another.

THE FUTURE

Despite the successes experienced so far, UWA Library staff view the implementation of the social media strategy this year as just the beginning. Development of the social media accounts will continue in 2015 with plans to encourage more user led content, create more multimedia content and increase collaboration with both internal UWA departments and other libraries using social media to share best practice and ideas.

The social media strategy also identified the need to explore the way in which students, staff and researchers use social media to support their teaching, learning and research activities at UWA. This has led to a 'social media for researchers' project and the development of a digital literacy framework in collaboration with UWA Student Services. Whilst both projects are still in the initial stages, it is envisaged that UWA Library will offer some form of training for researchers and HDR students around using social media to disseminate and promote research in 2015. UWA Library staff will be able to share the lessons learnt from the Library social media accounts and emphasise the importance of strategy and continual monitoring.

Buoyed by the success of the social media accounts in 2014, UWA Library is now looking at how the Library's strategic key messages can be more effectively disseminated to an even wider audience than just the social media networks. In contrast to the rich analytics tools available for the social media accounts, it is difficult to measure the success and value of other more traditional communication and promotional activities as reputation and good will can't be measured in the same way as 'followers'. The exploration of the value of communications and the metrics around the reach of key messages will become a focus in 2015 as UWA Library works to develop a holistic communication plan and engagement framework, which will include the social media accounts as just some of the channels available for audience engagement at UWA.

CONCLUSION

The UWA Library's social media strategy was originally developed and implemented in order to revitalise the existing social media accounts which were seen as missed opportunities for engaging with students and promoting new services and resources. The key components of the social media strategy included content planning and scheduling, establishment of a social media team, promotion and monitoring and review, with the main aim of increasing

followers on the accounts. The UWA Library's implementation of the social media strategy was deemed successful, with rapidly increasing follower numbers and improved engagement levels. However, it was soon realized that a social media strategy needs to be constantly revised and fine-tuned to stay relevant and effective. Other lessons learnt included the importance of collaboration and cross-promotion and the need to experiment with different content to discover what appeals to the audience in question. UWA Library's experiences with social media will now be built upon in the development of a wider engagement framework and communication plan to ensure wider reach for important key messages.

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