



**Andrej Miklosik**  
PhD, Associate Professor,  
University of Economics in Bratislava, Slovak Republic  
1 Dolnozemska cesta Str,  
85235 Bratislava, Slovak Republic  
miklosik@euba.sk

## Search-centric approach to sustainability of academic marketing

**Abstract.** Organisations are looking for the way of optimising the effects of marketing with respect to their sustainability. Three of the most important characteristics of sustainability concept include friendliness to the environment, long-term positive economic effects and respect to the customer by means of non-aggressive

marketing based on principles of social responsibility. In this article, the author aims at introducing the concept of search-centric marketing as the marketing approach reflecting changes in consumer behaviour on one hand and the desire for sustainability on the other hand. A cyclic induced effect of sustainability of marketing activities is introduced showing the mutual dependence of addressing a higher number of potential students, higher quality of students and increased level of brand recognition and awareness of a university. The evidence is provided regarding the importance of reaching top results in search engines for relevant keywords to increase effects of marketing activities, improve conversion rate and avoid wasting of resources.

**Keywords:** Academic Marketing; Marketing Communication; Search-centric Marketing; Search Engine Marketing; Search Engine Optimisation; Sustainable Marketing

**JEL Classification:** I23; M31; Q01

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### Андрей Міклошик

кандидат економічних наук, доцент, кафедра маркетингу, Економічний університет у Братиславі, Словацька Республіка

#### Пошук-орієнтований підхід до сталого розвитку академічного маркетингу

**Анотація.** З огляду на перспективи сталого розвитку, організації шукають шляхи оптимізації маркетингового впливу. Трьома найважливішими характеристиками концепції сталого розвитку є дружнє ставлення до навколишнього середовища, наявність довгострокових позитивних економічних ефектів та повага до клієнта, яка проявляється через реалізацію політики неагресивного маркетингу, заснованому на принципах соціальної відповідальності. У даній статті представлено концепцію пошук-орієнтованого маркетингу як підходу, що, з одного боку, відображає зміни в поведінці споживача, а з іншого – прагнення до сталого розвитку. Циклічний індуктивний ефект сталого розвитку маркетингової діяльності підтверджує наявність взаємозалежності між більшою кількістю потенційних студентів, вищою якістю підготовки студентів, пізнаваністю бренду та обізнаністю про університет. Наведено докази щодо важливості використання ключових слів у пошукових системах для підвищення ефективності маркетингової діяльності, а також для того, щоб уникнути марної трати ресурсів.

**Ключові слова:** академічний маркетинг; маркетингові комунікації; пошук-орієнтований маркетинг; пошуковий маркетинг; пошукова оптимізація; сталий маркетинг.

### Андрей Миклошик

кандидат экономических наук, доцент, кафедра маркетинга, Экономический университет в Братиславе, Словацкая Республика

#### Поиск-ориентированный подход к устойчивому развитию академического маркетинга

**Аннотация.** С точки зрения устойчивости, организации ищут пути оптимизации влияния маркетинга. Тремя наиболее важными составляющими концепции устойчивости являются дружественное отношение к окружающей среде, наличие долгосрочных положительных экономических эффектов, а также уважительное отношение к клиенту, которое проявляется через реализацию политики неагрессивного маркетинга, основанного на принципах социальной ответственности. В данной статье целью автора является представление концепции поиск-ориентированного маркетинга как подхода, отражающего изменения в поведении потребителей с одной стороны и стремления к устойчивости с другой стороны. Циклический индуцированный эффект устойчивости маркетинговой деятельности показывает взаимную зависимость большего количества потенциальных студентов, более высокого качества подготовки студентов, большей узнаваемости бренда и осведомленности об университете. Приведены доказательства касательно важности достижения лучших результатов при помощи использования ключевых слов в поисковых системах для повышения эффективности ведения маркетинговой деятельности и коэффициента конверсии, а также для того, чтобы избежать напрасной траты ресурсов.

**Ключевые слова:** академический маркетинг; маркетинговые коммуникации; поиск-ориентированный маркетинг; поисковый маркетинг; поисковая оптимизация; устойчивый маркетинг.

### Introduction

Over the past few decades, people have realised that it is important to ensure long-term sustainability of development. As Zaremba-Warneke (2013) notes, in the second half of the twentieth century it became certain that continuing current, narrowly understood economic development will not ensure a stable improvement of economic, ecological and social conditions, both for present and future generations. This approach is in contrary to focusing solely on short-term objectives in terms of maximising consumption benefits and economic parameters of business. Ensuring sustainability has positive long-term effects for organisations; Varadarajan (2015) proves the connection between sustainable innovations and competitive advantage. The concept of sustainability has various forms: sustainable development, sustainable consumption, sustainable management or sustainable marketing.

Sustainable marketing can be defined as an approach to marketing management that is oriented not only on maximising economic benefits for an organisation through stimulation of demand and intensive product placement but on the effect of sustainability of marketing activities as well. Zaremba-Warneke (2013) further defines sustainable marketing as a process of satisfying consumers and society's needs through planning and making conceptions, prices, promotions and distributions of ideas, goods and services in a way that both satisfies the counterparties and is sustainable at the same time.

Several important components or characteristics of sustainable marketing can be identified:

- effects of activities should exhibit higher durability;
- measures should respect the environment;
- instruments are not to be aggressive towards consumers.

The author of this article aims at introducing the concept of search-centric marketing as a new approach to sustainable marketing. Partial objectives have been set as follows:

- to prove a link between the implementation of e-marketing and sustainability of marketing activities;
- to analyse changing consumer behaviour as a driver for search-centric marketing;
- to define search-centric marketing and create a conceptual model of its functioning.

To achieve defined primary and partial objectives, the following methodology was applied. Firstly, the available scientific resources regarding sustainable marketing and changing trends in consumer behaviour as the effect of the new or digital economy have been collected. Information was analysed and enriched by the framework of academic marketing. By applying methods of analysis, critical evaluation, reasoning, generalisation and modelling, the author has created supporting argumentation to indicate e-marketing as a concept allowing sustainability of marketing activities. Further, an in-depth analysis of the tertiary education market in the Slovak Republic has been carried out and trends towards an increase in the number of university students and the relevant causes have been evaluated. Based on these findings, the author's model of search-centric marketing as an approach taking into account changing consumer behaviour and the efforts of organisations on economic, social and environmental sustainability has been introduced. This model is considered to be a contribution to the theory of scientific research in the issues of sustainable marketing.

#### **Quality-oriented approach to academic marketing**

Universities and faculties compete on the market with potential students to persuade them to select their study programme. The intensity of competition is reflected not only in the market of students. Universities also focus on other segments/markets: business sector, staff, teachers, graduates, public opinion makers and sponsors. Each of them requires a different approach to exploit its potential. Also, there is a number of stakeholders in such markets. In order to gain customers, universities need to apply marketing tools intensively. A systematic application of marketing management to management processes enables them to define product quality, market position and implement measures to obtain the desired market share. Academic, university marketing or educational marketing are terms that reflect the specifics of the academic environment and their impact on marketing activities. The content and structure of marketing activities of the university is quite complex and, according to Svetlak (2011), it contains components such as the strategic direction of the school – a definition of opportunities and threats from the external environment, an analysis of strengths and weaknesses, setting of long-term goals and a strategy to achieve them, a style of school management, internal personnel marketing, relational marketing, or the analysis of the factors affecting results and development of the school. Universities build their market image and increase the level of brand recognition through their marketing tools and marketing communication. At the same time, however, its faculties are present in the market and strive to create their own identity. An optimal marketing strategy of the university is therefore based on synergistic effects of brand building. Schools are working to increase the level of brand awareness and credibility, while their faculties are deriving benefits from such activities. Faculties are also running their own marketing activities, which should be in line with the strategy and communication of the university.

Marketing activities in all segments significantly affect brand perception and reputation of the university and its faculties. The aim of marketing activities related to the student market segment is to purposefully reach and convince potential students to select a faculty and help them to become successful students and graduates. Thus, universities use the possibilities of marketing to maximise the number of students. Efforts to increase the effect of reaching potential customers are understandable; however, they should pursue the objective of increasing the resulting level and quality of graduates of the faculty. The importance of quality control of educational processes highlights the work of Cahlik and Markova (2009). Only more appropriately trained graduates do not have a problem with being success-

ful in the labour market and further represent their faculty in the economic practice. Savoiu, Neculescu, Taicu, Serbanescu, and Crisan (2014) highlight the responsibility of an academic organisation in providing satisfactory performance for graduates in the labour market. This relationship was shown in the study of Dado, Taborecka Petrovicova, Riznic and Rajic (2013), which was examining the relationship between the quality of studies and the satisfaction of students. One of the conclusions of this research is that universities should promote an increase the quality of study programs and, by doing this, to meet the expectations of their students because students' willingness to recommend studies to their friends and relatives is one of the effects. This positive effect allows us to determine the quality level of graduates as a fundamental objective and a determinant of success and sustainability of marketing activities of a certain university and its faculties.

#### **Electronic marketing as a model for sustainable marketing**

The aim of any effectively operating institution should be optimisation of the operations and effects of marketing through maximising benefits by the parallel minimisation of costs. There is a number of tools available that should be used by faculties and their deployment does not require a dramatic increase of the marketing budget. Usually, these are closely connected to the deployment of innovative ICT solutions. As Benesova and Nemethova note, the implementation of ICT itself does not represent a competitive advantage; at present its utilisation is crucially inevitable. It is necessary to launch such ICT which supports business processes leading to the fulfilment of corporate strategies (Benesova & Nemethova, 2013) [2]. These options are provided by electronic marketing and its application for reaching a significant increase in visibility and thus accelerating the effects of marketing. Electronic marketing or e-marketing is a set of marketing tools, methods and techniques to be implemented using electronic environment, electronic means of communication and electronic presence of the target audience. Other terms connected to e-marketing include online marketing, digital marketing or Internet marketing. Despite minor differences in their content, they can be perceived as synonymous with the term e-marketing.

Electronic marketing is characterised by both high added value and efficiency. The research of carried out by Dorcak and Delina (2011) has shown the existence of a high correlation between the use of electronic marketing tools and selected categories of economic efficiency of enterprises [8]. The work done by Piliik (2008) was devoted to the analysis of electronic marketing as one of the four current marketing trends [17]. The author examined a significant contribution of electronic marketing to enhancing the competitiveness of enterprises. As Zak notes, the driving force behind the development of knowledge society and a requirement of its intelligent growth is currently the sector of the digital economy, which has a major influence on the realisation of marketing activities in companies (Zak, 2015) [23]. One part of electronic marketing tools represents marketing on the Internet. Its tools are non-demanding regarding the budget; they are quickly implementable, and their results are well measurable. The amount and variability of electronic marketing tools calls for their consistent categorisation. Miklosik (2013) proposed to categorise them into two groups:

- activities and marketing tools related to the preparation of electronic presence;
- activities and marketing tools associated with attracting visitors and reaching target audience through the prepared presentation tools and applications [14].

Tools related to the preparation of electronic presence include all the tools, techniques and procedures connected with the preparation, implementation, deployment and maintenance of electronic settlements and presentations of the product and/or organizations. Activities and marketing tools associated with attracting visitors and reaching target audiences through a prepared presentation tools and applications include, in particular, preparation, implementation and monitoring of communication campaigns. Their aim is to bring visitors/potential customers to various forms of electronic presence of the organisation. One of the most important components of electronic mar-

keting is search engine marketing. It can be defined as an application of marketing tools in the environment of search engines. Its goal is to achieve the best possible search engine rankings for specific keywords. It utilises two main options for reaching top positions in search results for defined keywords: inclusion in paid search results (pay per click or PPC) and inclusion in organic search results (search engine optimisation or SEO).

There has been a great dispute between scientific authorities regarding the character of digital marketing tools with respect to sustainability. Their eco-friendliness is discussed most. On the one hand, there are authors who consider electronic marketing to be more eco-friendly compared to traditional marketing. Using the electronic way of communicating the marketing message to the customer is considered more eco-friendly by Beza-kova (2013) [3]. Moreover, she states that most of the companies link sustainability with activities such as recycling of paper, waste separation, use of electronic invoices and so.

The demand for eco-products, sustainable products and sustainable marketing is generated by consumers as well. Klepochova (2011) notes that there is a raising awareness of the importance of fair and sustainable business by consumers, and more consumers are changing their behaviour with respect to the environment [12]. On the other hand, paperless marketing does not have to be necessarily friendlier to the environment. Northwood (2014) argues that electronic document consumes electricity each time it is opened. On the other hand, paper has a one-time carbon footprint and is highly recyclable (70–95%). Busch (2011) argues that print shall remain part of media and communication as a sustainable and eco-friendly medium. The concept of sustainability in marketing is closely connected to responsible business. The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) can be considered to be part of the sustainable marketing concept by integrating responsible approach to environment into an organisation's internal process and external communication as well.

Regardless of the ongoing debate, it can be stated that electronic marketing creates conditions for long-term sustainability. This is reflected by Doru Alexandru, Irina, and Alice (2014) who argue that digital single market in the EU would generate new types of growth and also sustainable economic and social benefits for all European citizens [9]. The work of Crosno and Cui (2014) highlights the efforts of organisations to deploy sustainable technological solutions and products [6]. As it will be argued, electronic marketing and marketing communications can be perceived in this context because of its close link to sustainability effects.

Search engine marketing and especially search engine optimization fulfils all three defined criteria for sustainable marketing:

Effects of its implementation exhibit higher durability: positive effects of SEO tend to last weeks or even months or years after the implementation was finished.

- Its measures are friendly to the environment: at least one part of the scientific spectrum is convinced of its friendliness to the environment; the effect is emphasised by using environmentally friendly equipment; efforts are carried out to reduce power consumption of mobile devices and multimedia or reduce negative impacts on human health.
- Instruments are not aggressive towards consumers: SEO strives to improve organic search results. Thus, the inclusion of link to the desired website is absolutely natural and non-aggressive; the suitability of reference for the user is evaluated by an independent search engine algorithm and the consumer does not perceive the positioning as a form of advertising.

### Changing consumer behaviour determining marketing activities

It is crucial for organisations to reflect changes in the environment and respond to them. As Knoskova (2015) notes, to survive and prosper, organisations need to embed the processes and mechanisms to discover the major technology and consumer trends and respond to them through new growth areas [13]. In the digital era, consumers change the way they access, digest and consume information and media. The trend of multiscreen appears to have been one of the most apparent changes in consumer behaviour over the past few years. Consumers often use more «screens» to access information or to consume content. Televisions, computers, laptops, tablets or smartphones are considered to be «screens». Consumers often use various devices in parallel. For instance, while watching TV, they use the smartphone to access social media, check new messages or chat with friends. Another kind of multiscreen is the sequential use of screens. In the process of looking for information, consumer starts the work on one device (e.g. the smartphone), continues on a second device (e.g. the tablet) and finishes the process on a third device (e.g. the notebook). Such changes in consumer behaviour have been proved by an extensive study by Google (2012). Some of its results that impact the perception of marketing activities by organisations include the following:

- 77% of TV viewers use another device at the same time in a typical day;
- smartphones are the most common starting place for on-line activities;
- 90% of consumers use multiple screens sequentially to accomplish a task over time;
- consumers rely on search to move between devices (Table 1).

Search is the most convenient and frequent way for moving between devices and continuing the process. This process can be an important part of a buying decision-making process and thus it is necessary for any organisation to address the issue of gaining top positions in search results and not to lose potential customers. The importance and effects of marketing in search engines for universities and educational institutions were confirmed by studies conducted in academic marketing. Ayu and Elgharabawy (2013) investigated the relationship between the accessibility of websites and positioning in the search results of institutions providing higher education [1]. The study conducted by Xu and Gao (2012) confirmed that the performance of the website of universities in placement in search results lags far behind expectations of students [22].

An empirical study of the British organization Jisc (2009), which is engaged in providing digital marketing solutions for educational institutions in the UK, proved the existence of positive effects of the implementation of measures in the field of search engine optimisation tools in the form of increasing traffic of participating educational and research institutions' websites.

For an efficient application of marketing it is thus crucial to reflect these changes. A model of search-centric marketing which creates prerequisites of sustainability of marketing activities will be introduced in the results part of this article.

### Results

#### Analysis of environment – market with tertiary education in the Slovak Republic

Over the recent years, a continuously increasing intensity of competition in the market of higher education in the Slovak Republic can be observed. Universities have to expend considerable effort to convey their benefits to potential customers (future students). Several reasons can be identified as the cause for

Tab. 1: Search as the most important way to continue work on a second device

Way of moving to device / Activity	Searching for information	Browsing the Internet	Shopping online	Watching online video
Search again on the second device	63%	61%	51%	43%
Directly navigating to the destination site	52%	58%	48%	43%
Via email / sending a link to himself	49%	45%	31%	30%

Source: Google (2012) [10]

this situation. On the one hand, there is a growth in the number of universities and their faculties, and therefore a natural thickening of the market takes place, on the other hand, the impact of a lower birth rate can be felt, which is reflected in the population curve, thereby reducing the total number of potential candidates for higher education. These two trends act synergistically and the overall effect is a quite striking increase in the intensity of the competitive struggle. Universities need to respond to the situation and use tools that enable them to effectively reach and convince potential students. Marketing provides a wide range of tools that can be systematically applied to achieve marketing and business objectives. With the development of electronic devices, communication and digitisation, there is a growing importance of electronic instruments in the marketing mix. Despite the fact that their practical usage has been verified and their methods are used intensively in the commercial sector, universities are often conservative and inflexible when it comes to their application.

The efforts for maximising a number of students are affected by the specifics of the market of higher education in the Slovak Republic – the existence of normatives for students. Students still have quite a significant weight to secure funding from the state budget. In the proposed methodology for the allocation of funds from the state budget for 2015 (Ministry of Education, 2015), it is foreseen that the majority of funds shall be paid in the form of wage subsidies and insurance with regard to the subsidy for carrying out the study programs. Students and graduates are the most important component of the subsidy, weighting 85% in the overall criterion mix. The number of students is taken into account when setting the amount of subsidies on goods and services as well. Universities, both in Slovakia and other countries, have a limited budget and are unable to invest such an amount of funds in marketing that would enable a comprehensive coverage of all activities. Universities, and especially their faculties, therefore have to use a highly selective approach to the processes of marketing management. Among the available tools, they shall concentrate on those which produce the greatest positive effects. Therefore, in these institutions marketing is often limited to the implementation of selected activities of marketing communication. Within it, the school focuses only on certain activities, mainly in the field of public relations. This perception of marketing is characteristic for most entities in the market.

As it was justified in the first part of this article, the quality of educational process should be the crucial element, which can become the corner stone of sustainable academic marketing. If a certain university manages to induce the cyclical effect of marketing activities (Figure 1), it will be able to continuously maintain the level of effects of marketing by gradually decreasing investments in marketing and marketing communications. The ultimate aim and effect of this spiral of marketing activities is to ensure long-term sustainability of marketing activities and thus to strengthen the market position and to increase the competitiveness of the university. It will be able to survive in the highly intense competitive market, gain more students, reach, engage and attract customers and stakeholders from other market segments.

This cyclic induced effect of sustainability of marketing activities in the form of an increased reputation and brand recognition will create conditions for long-term effects of marketing activities that are not based on short-term goals such as maximising the number of students.

**Search centric approach to marketing**

As the effect of proven changes in behaviour of potential students/customers, faculties need to incorporate the search-centric approach to their marketing activities. To do that, a conceptual model of search-centric marketing has been developed (Figure 2).

This model shows that the placement in search results on relevant keywords determines

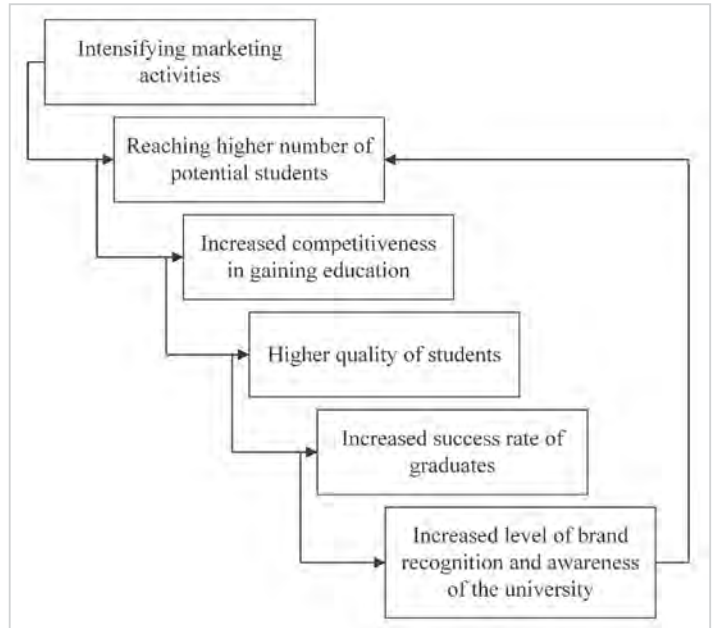


Fig. 1: **Cyclic induced effect of sustainability of marketing activities**  
Source: Processed by the author

the success and sustainability of marketing activities regardless of the type of marketing activities and the tools applied. Having analysed the changes relevant to the marketing of educational institutions, we identified the following:

- Potential and current students rely on search when looking for information regarding their future or current studies. This fact is in coherence with changing perception of media communication of Slovak youth (Vrabec, Petranova, & Solik, 2014) [21].
- Top placement in search results for relevant keywords enables a faculty to reach them in a targeted and non-aggressive manner and to maintain its position in decision-making process.
- Search is a connecting bridge between different types of marketing activities; it connects well offline and online activities.
- Even various forms of traditional (offline) advertising are significantly weakened in their effect, if the approached potential customer will not be able to find relevant information (e.g. from a radio spot using a full-text search).
- It is argued that a website was regarded to be a neuralgic point of marketing activities over the last ten years; now it is the position in search results which determines the success and sustainability of marketing activities.

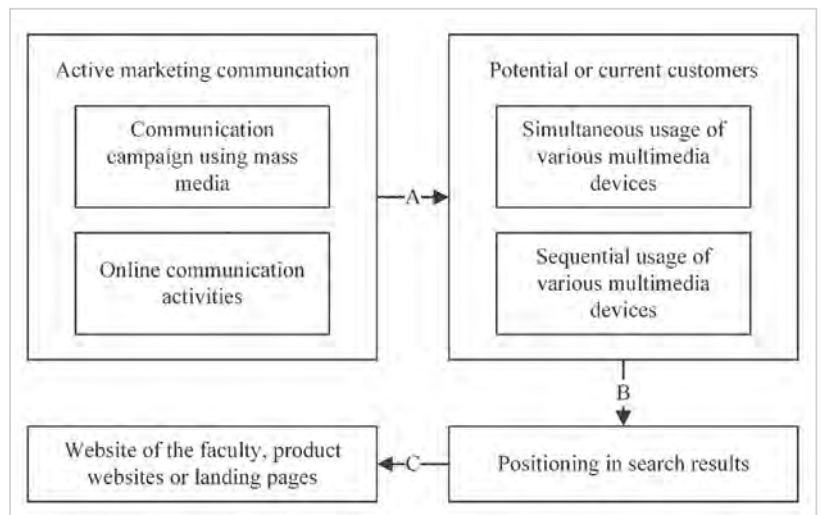


Fig. 2: **Search-centric model for sustainable marketing**  
Source: Processed by the author

The components of the presented model include:

- A faculty or university launches a communication campaign using any kind of media mix that may include TV, radio, billboard, print, offline or online PR, website banners, social media advertising, etc. Potential or current customers are exposed to it, e.g. 1% of them is addressed by the communication (connector «A»).
- Several steps in the decision-making process precede the final decision. A potential student is looking for information resources. Typically, such a person starts the search for information online. Most frequently, even if he/she recognises the communicated website, he uses full text search to research more on the advertised topic (connector «B»).
- If a certain organisation has managed to reach top positions in the search results page for the used keywords, the person is targeted to the desired website containing relevant information, e.g. the faculty homepage, any product website or a landing page (connector «C»).

It is apparent from this model that the application of this search-centric approach in an organisation means that it will not waste its resources. If there is some potential customer addressed by marketing activities, the organisation is able to effectively involve him in the decision-making process and, by doing this, to significantly increase the conversion rate.

To apply the search-centric approach to marketing, universities and faculties should take the following steps in their implementation process:

- 1) to analyse marketing targets and consider their long-term sustainability;
- 2) to recognize the importance of obtaining positions in search results that need to be achieved at the same time as the effect of any marketing activity;
- 3) to define keywords that shall be relevant for a certain institution and are connected to both its general position and information regarding the faculty and its educational programme and the planned marketing/communication campaign at the same time;
- 4) to determine which search engines are relevant to the entity and its target audience;

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