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Rewarding Relationships: A Quasi-Experimental Design Evaluating the Impact of an Extension Public Relations Seminar

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While Extension communication units have seen success in implementing brand strategies to raise awareness of Extension, the public value and need for Extension programming continue to be misunderstood. College students have the potential to ensure the future of Extension is viable. To expose undergraduate students to the brand and value of Extension, a public relations seminar was developed and delivered by a state Extension specialist to 95 students enrolled in an agricultural technical writing course at a land-grant university. The seminar served as a treatment in the quasi-experimental design, which included information about the land-grant mission, Extension resources, and potential careers related to Extension. Findings revealed that the public relations seminar had a significant impact on the students' awareness and value of Extension and their consideration of Extension as a career. Implications from this study support strategic public relations having a positive, short-term impact on students' perceptions of Extension. While future research should explore the long-term impacts of public relations on students' perceptions of Extension, it is recommended that Extension professionals and agricultural communicators implement public relations activities targeting undergraduate students and use brand advocates, like Extension specialists, to elevate the brand.

Keywords: public relations, social cognitive theory, quasi-experimental methods, Extension, branding, strategic relationships

Introduction

The Cooperative Extension Service was developed to offer the American people education and outreach related to agriculture (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2020). At its inception, Extension primarily served rural audiences. After the 1914 Smith-Lever Act passed, Extension specialists, programs, and demonstrations brought practical hands-on teaching and

useful knowledge to rural communities (West et al., 2009). Because of this particular method of communication and instruction, a need for printed teaching materials became evident. This need was filled in the 1928 Capper-Ketcham Act that aided in the finances of printing and distribution of information (Teagarden et al., 1991, p. 85). Information was made available to the public through Extension communication services units, which gathered technical information from subject-matter specialists, then created and produced printed materials (Snowdon & Evans, 1991). Technology and dynamic audiences are largely attributed to the changes in Extension programs and structures from the past (Donnellan & Montgomery, 2005; West et al., 2009).

Today, as more people have moved away from traditional farming jobs, Extension has begun to play an even more vital role in connecting diverse audiences, from both rural and urban areas to agriculture and related topics. Despite the important role Extension played in serving the country throughout history, Extension has faced challenges in proving overall value and brand recognition (Abrams et al., 2010; Baker, Abrams et al., 2011; Hammond, 2003; Telg et al., 2007). In addition to challenges in marketing Extension, other issues include insufficient funding, overburdened agents, lack of support staff, and difficulty documenting the impact of its work (Harder et al., 2009, 2013; Lamm et al., 2013). As a whole, the organization has overcome challenges of the past, like evolving methods of delivery. Now, Extension communication services have the opportunity to be a critical component in continuing to fulfill the mission and ensuring the organization is a viable resource in the future.

It is important for Extension professionals to overcome these challenges, as well as economic, technological, and management barriers, in order to build and maintain relationships with stakeholders. Relationships are a vital resource of Extension programs, whether on a local, state, or national level, and are the foundation of Extension's mission. Extension professionals must develop and maintain strategic relationships with industry stakeholders, local residents, and elected officials to best understand the needs of their communities and then effectively communicate research and discovery back to the public (Chappell, 1990; Irani et al., 2006). Extension professionals provide information to industry stakeholders about research related to agriculture, natural resources, families, nutrition, finance, and community issues. Moreover, Extension constantly works to understand and address the needs of stakeholders. Similar to their relationship with industry stakeholders, Extension professionals often seek relationships with community organizations and members to better understand the needs within their own communities. Given the vastness and diversity of different stakeholder groups within a community, communication with all groups can prove to be challenging.

Another important relationship is that between Extension professionals and elected officials (Jackson & Smith, 1999). Extension professionals work closely with local officials on the county level, especially in areas where county Extension programs are partly funded by the county. County elected officials may determine a county Extension program's budget and operating procedures. Similarly, Extension administration must maintain relationships with state legislators

as they play a significant role in determining the budget for state Extension programs. Local Extension professionals are best equipped to build and maintain relationships with local stakeholders and, thus, engage community residents and leaders to understand the needs of local communities. Local Extension professionals also play a vital role in prioritizing research by communicating with other Extension educators and university faculty about needs within communities and how research can be applied to those community needs (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2020).

Research specifically investigating the internal branding of Extension has recommended using brand advocates within the Extension system to communicate the value and importance of Extension to internal and external audiences (Zagonel et al., 2019). Those who are passionate about the work of Extension can make a difference in how the brand is perceived and can add value through strategic relationships with stakeholders (Ray et al., 2015). These individuals who are passionate about the Extension brand could effectively share its mission with their own networks and could potentially interact directly with Extension as a client or stakeholder.

Relationships that brand advocates build and manage go hand-in-hand with Hutton's (1999) definition of public relations, which is the strategic management of relationships. Effective management requires two-way communication between Extension and its public (Irani et al., 2006). The two-way symmetrical communication model is the most effective public relations model and is uniquely positioned as it involves both gathering and disseminating information (Grunig, 1992). Public relations efforts can be applied to build and maintain relationships, as well as address other common challenges in Extension, such as marketing, brand recognition, communicating impacts, and funding (Abrams et al., 2010; Baker, Abrams et al., 2011; Hill et al., 2017; Whelan et al., 2010).

Comparable to the public population, Loizzo and Lilliard (2015) determined that most undergraduate students are unfamiliar with the mission of Extension. Undergraduate students, particularly those enrolled at a land-grant institution, could be exposed to the mission and value of Extension in various ways. Undergraduate students can gain experience with Extension by participating in internship programs and research opportunities, both of which bring value to the Extension program (Henley et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2001). These opportunities will not only expose students to the mission of Extension but also make students aware of career opportunities in Extension. The future legacy of Extension will depend on students choosing to pursue careers as Extension professionals (Ebner et al., 2017). One of the major barriers to students selecting a particular career path is a lack of knowledge about the career and/or a misunderstanding of what a person would do in a certain career field (Baker et al., 2013; Baker, Irani et al., 2011; Chapman, 1981). Moreover, students who do not choose a career in Extension will be future policymakers and voters who hold the key to ensuring Extension programming is supported at state and local levels. Thus, students remain an important audience for Extension communication and branding efforts (Baker, Irani et al., 2011). In these reasons lie the researchers' interest in

employing a public relations seminar for undergraduate students and evaluating the value of the seminar.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Public Relations Literature

Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 4) define public relations as “the management of communication between an organization and its publics.” A public relations department manages the strategic communication between an organization and its internal and external target audiences. Excellent public relations derive from goals that are well-aligned with an organization’s mission and can improve the overall effectiveness of an organization (Grunig & Grunig, 1992).

When public relations efforts are effective, the efforts enable an organization to meet its goals and enable relationships between the organization and stakeholders. Public relations departments often facilitate and develop outputs, such as news releases or events. Individual outputs are easily evaluated by web traffic or the number of attendees. However, Hon and Grunig (1999) suggest that public relations efforts should also be evaluated for long-term outcomes, such as a change in opinion or attitude over time. Public relations departments elevate the overall organization when efforts impact attitudes or behavior. Hon and Grunig (1999) developed a measurement to quantify an organization’s relationship with its stakeholders with seven indicators, including control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship, and communal relationship. These organization-public relationship indicators significantly contribute to an organization’s ability to influence attitude and behavior change (Ki & Hon, 2007). When public relations indicators are strategically strengthened based on the needs of the organization and its target audiences, the indicators can lead to a more positive attitude toward the organization. A more positive attitude toward the organization can lead to more significant impacts, such as supportive behavioral intentions (Ki & Hon, 2007).

Social Cognitive Theory

Students interested in Extension may seek careers in communication, community development, youth development, or research in a variety of agricultural and human sciences fields, including biosecurity, animal sciences, natural resources, nutrition, and pest management (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2020). The process that students use to make career choices is complex and can be impacted by their observations of others, self-efficacy, interests, and media (Bandura, 1986, 2001; Lent et al., 2000). Bandura (1977) established social learning theory to explain changes in a person’s behavior. In social learning theory, self-efficacy is directly correlated with behavior change and derives from observing others. Lent et al. (1993) expanded Bandura’s social cognitive theory to develop social cognitive career theory, which explains how people make career decisions. Social cognitive career theory combines self-efficacy, a prominent variable in social cognitive theory, with outcome expectations and personal goals within the

aspect of career development (Lent & Brown, 1996). Previous studies have applied social cognitive theory and social cognitive career theory to understand better how urban students decide to pursue careers in agriculture, the self-efficacy of early career agricultural education teachers, and how communication campaigns can be better informed (Henry et al., 2014; Leal et al., 2017; McKim & Velez, 2017).

Public relations literature and characteristics found within the Social Cognitive Career Theory were both used to plan and evaluate the impact of the study's public relations seminar. Joining these frameworks allows this study to focus narrowly and effectively evaluate a unique organization.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore the value of a public relations seminar for undergraduate students about the land-grant mission and its many resources and careers. The following objectives guided this study:

RO1: Determine the impact of a public relations seminar on students' awareness and the relevance of Extension.

RO2: Determine the impact of a public relations seminar on students' intended use and value of Extension.

RO3: Determine the impact of a public relations seminar on students' perceptions of Extension as a career option.

RO4: Determine students' perceptions of a public relations seminar about Extension.

Methods/Procedures

As Extension professionals communicate the value and mission of Extension to the public, one possible solution is to implement strategic public relations efforts focused on the state level and future stakeholders, like students. An opportunity exists to involve state Extension specialists as brand advocates for Extension to build relationships and demonstrate the importance of Extension to current/future/potential stakeholders. A public relations seminar about the land-grant mission and its resources and careers was created to test this concept. The seminar was hosted during an hour-long class period and presented by a state Extension specialist for nursery crop production and marketing. It focused on the Extension specialist's program and how it fits into the land-grant mission. The seminar also included information about the Extension mission, resources and programming, and the structure and careers available in Extension.

To answer the research objectives in this study, a quasi-experimental design was used, with the treatment under investigation being the public relations seminar. A reflective pre-post survey

was administered immediately after the seminar. A convenience sample of 95 college students enrolled in a technical writing course in the college of agriculture at a large land-grant institution in the spring semester of 2019 was used for this study. The focus of the class was on technical communication needed for agricultural professionals. Students were in majors across the college of agriculture.

The instrument was based on a previous survey developed by Boyer et al. (2016) and Miller et al. (2016) and adapted for use within this particular study's context. The instrument was chosen because of the similarity in purposes and samples to the current study—exposing undergraduate students to Extension and evaluating the exposure. Approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board prior to the study launch. Major constructs measured in the instrument were 1) Extension awareness, 2) relevance and familiarity with Extension, 3) use and value of Extension, and 4) Extension as a career. Cronbach's Alpha was used to determine the reliability of the instrument, with the reliability of constructs ranging from .81 to .84. Thus, all items within the construct were reliable at an acceptable level for use (Field, 2013). Each construct included 1-2 items with a total of 7 quantitative items used for analysis in this study. Items were measured on a four-point Likert scale with 1 = *not relevant/useful/valuable* to 4 = *extremely relevant/useful/valuable*. Two open-ended questions were also used to address research objective four. The questions were 1) What were the most interesting aspects of the seminar? and 2) Do you have anything else to add about the seminar?

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 26 for means and standard deviations, frequencies and percentages, and paired sample *t*-tests when appropriate. Open-ended responses were organized using Microsoft Excel and analyzed using the constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Emergent themes were categorized, and frequency and percentages were calculated and reported.

Limitations to this work are that it was done at one particular institution at one particular time with a convenience sampling method. The results of this work cannot be generalized to other populations, but results could be transferable to similar Extension systems with similar characteristics. While results from convenience samples should not be generalized, there is evidence that homogenous convenience samples could be more similar to larger populations than once thought (Jager et al., 2017). This study may be difficult to replicate exactly because of the individual characteristics of the particular Extension specialist who delivered this public relations seminar.

Results

Objective One: Awareness and Relevance

To understand the impact of the public relations seminar on students' awareness of Extension, participants ($N = 95$) were first asked if they had heard of Extension prior to the seminar. Most (88.4%, $f = 84$) had heard of Extension prior to the seminar, and 11.6% ($f = 11$) had not.

To understand students' perceived relevance and familiarity with Extension, we asked them to provide the relevance they saw for Extension on a four-point Likert scale before and after the seminar and their familiarity with resources available from Extension before and after the seminar. The means for relevance ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.02$) and familiarity ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 0.94$) prior to the seminar were relatively low (Table 1). After the seminar, means for relevance ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.70$) and familiarity ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.70$) increased, and the mean difference pre- to post-seminar was significant at $p < .001$ for both items.

Table 1. Relevance and Familiarity of Extension Pre- and Post-Seminar ($N = 95$)

	Pre-Seminar		Post-Seminar	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Relevance of Extension*	2.52	1.02	3.29	0.70
Familiarity of Extension Resources*	2.32	0.94	3.35	0.70

Note. Scale was 1 to 4, with 1 = *not familiar/relevant* to 4 = *extremely familiar/relevant*.

* $p < .001$.

Objective Two: Use and Value of Extension

To understand the value students prescribed to Extension, participants were asked about the value of Extension prior to and after the seminar (Table 2). The means for students' perceived value of Extension prior to the seminar was fairly high ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.68$), and after the seminar, there was a significant increase at the $p < .001$ level in the mean ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.50$).

Table 2. Value of Extension Pre- and Post-Seminar ($N = 95$)

	Pre-Seminar		Post-Seminar	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Value of Extension*	3.10	0.68	3.57	0.50

Note. Scale was 1 to 4, with 1 = *not valuable* to 4 = *extremely valuable*.

* $p < .001$.

It was of additional interest to understand if students intended to use Extension resources after the seminar (Table 3). Positive means were seen for the use of Extension resources both professionally ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.61$) and personally ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.60$).

Table 3. Intent to Use Extension Resources Professionally and Personally After the Seminar (N = 95)

Intent to Use	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Professionally	3.11	0.61
Personally	3.02	0.60

Note. Scale was 1 to 4, with 1 = *will not use* to 4 = *extremely likely I will use*.

Objective Three: Extension as a Career

To understand the impact the public relations seminar had on students' interest in Extension as a career, students were asked if they would consider a career in Extension before and after the seminar. Both prior to ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 0.73$) and after ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 0.81$) the seminar, the means for considering Extension as a career were low (Table 4). However, there was a significant increase at the $p < .001$ level in considering Extension as a career after the seminar.

Table 4. Mean Differences for Considering Extension as a Career (N = 95)

	Pre-Seminar		Post-Seminar	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I would consider a career in Extension*	2.08	0.73	2.53	0.81

Note. Scale was 1 to 4, with 1 = *extremely unlikely* and 4 = *extremely likely*.

* $p < .001$.

Objective Four: Student Perceptions of a Public Relations Seminar about Extension

In order to understand what elements of the seminar resonated with students the most, two open-ended questions were included in the survey. The first question asked what they thought were the most interesting concepts from the seminar (Table 5). The largest number of responses were for the extensive topic areas Extension covered ($f = 30$, 16.13%), followed by general ($f = 21$, 11.29%) and specific resources ($f = 21$, 11.29%). It is interesting to note that 20 (10.75%) of the comments were interested in the agent role, and 17 (9.14%) comments were about career opportunities. Sixteen (8.60%) comments mentioned online resources, 15 (8.06%) mentioned the land-grant mission or structure of Extension, 11 (5.91%) mentioned positive expressions about Extension, nine (4.84%) mentioned helping people, seven (3.76%) mentioned paid education, seven (3.76%) mentioned research, five (2.70%) mentioned interest in the Extension specialist role, five (2.70%) mentioned field days specifically, and two (1.08%) mentioned the passion of the presenter.

Table 5. Qualitative Responses for Most Interesting Concepts from Seminar

Theme	Examples of Answers	f(%)
Extensive topic areas covered	So many different areas, extensive topics covered, didn't know Extension covered things other than agriculture, more than just ag, large range of information, variety of topics, range and diversity of information	30 (16.13%)
General Resources	Learning about new resources, guides available for just about everything, availability of resources, all the resources	21 (11.29%)
Specific resources	New plant knowledge/plant reports, coyote trapping, specific info on certain topics, financial and economic topics, family/child development, hotline for personal care, cow/calf publications	21 (11.29%)
Agent role	The Extension agents, variety of specializations for agents, agents offer multiple programs, each county has an agent, all the activities agents get to do, how much agents get out of the office, agents specialize in an area	20 (10.75%)
Career opportunities	Career opportunities/options, variety of jobs, Extension employs so many people, there are always job opportunities, jobs, jobs all over the U.S., don't have to be super involved prior to working for Extension	17 (9.14%)
Online resources	All the information available online, YouTube videos, website, online information/publications, blogs	16 (8.60%)
Land-grant mission/Extension history/ structure	Land grant mission, Extension looks different in every state, every state has Extension, one program in most states, components of Extension	15 (8.06%)
Positive expressions about Extension	Extension is awesome, interesting, relevant to our lives, knowing where to go for everything, how important Extension is, benefits of being a part of the program	11 (5.91%)
Helping people	Wherever you are, there is an Extension agent to help, what Extension is willing to do for people, helping people/public, Extension helps people	9 (4.84%)
Paid education	Knowing they will help pay off loans, loan forgiveness, your college paid for, paid M.S. program	7 (3.76%)

Theme	Examples of Answers	f(%)
Research	Research, includes research, helpful research for farms and communities, amount of research	7 (3.76%)
Extension specialist role	That there are state Extension specialists, how much specialists do, specialists work a lot out of the office, specialists are passionate about their work	5 (2.70%)
Field days	Field days, field day opportunities, holding field days	5 (2.70%)
Great presenter / passionate	Speaker is awesome, she is passionate about Extension	2 (1.08%)

Note. There were 186 total comments, and $n = 93$. Frequency is calculated per comment.

The second open-ended question was to see if students had anything else to add about the seminar. Ten students included 12 additional comments, all of which focused on how positive the public relations seminar was for them (Table 6). Eight (66.67%) of the comments related to their enjoyment of the seminar, four (33.33%) said it was a valuable and/or an important experience, four (33.33%) said they were now considering Extension as a career, two (16.67%) thought it was a great learning opportunity, and two (16.67%) wanted to know more about Extension.

Table 6. Qualitative Responses for Anything Else to Share about Extension

Theme	Example of Answers	f(%)
Enjoyed/appreciated the seminar	I appreciate the presentation, enjoyed the presentation, thank you for the presentation, very interesting	8 (66.67%)
Important/valuable	I will use this in the future, it is an excellent program, very valuable to farmers, very valuable knowledge, important to know about	4 (33.33%)
Considering it as a career	Without this I would not be looking into Extension careers, would be a great way to have a variety of tasks, this job wouldn't be boring, big fan of making a career out of helping other people	4 (33.33%)
Great learning opportunity/	Good way to learn about anything, I will use this when looking for resources	2 (16.67%)
Want to know more	I wish I knew more about it, I look forward to researching this more in depth	2 (16.67%)

Note. There were 12 total comments, and $n = 10$ people. Frequency is calculated per comment.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this study show the value of a public relations seminar related to Extension for college students. Students' awareness of Extension, use and value of Extension, and Extension as a potential career were quantitatively measured before and after seminar participation. Overall, the seminar had a positive impact on participants' awareness and value of Extension and their consideration of Extension as a career. These findings suggest that a public relations event, such as a seminar, can have short-term impacts on students' awareness, perceived value, and career considerations related to Extension (Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Lent et al., 1993). Additionally, this finding of increased awareness and value is encouraging for increasing self-efficacy, which is correlated with behavior change and can come from observing others (Bandura, 1977).

There were statistically significant changes in the relevance of Extension and awareness of resources from Extension between the pre- and post-test measures. A large majority of students were aware of Extension but still were not aware of all aspects or the relevance to their lives. This finding could be explained due to the Extension specialist that hosted the event discussing their specific program rather than the full scope of Extension, but it also might indicate the students could see themselves in the Extension specialist who presented the seminar.

Although means were still relatively low for the construct of considering a career in Extension after participating in the public relations event, there was a statistically significant increase from their interest in a career in Extension prior to the seminar. This growth in career interest could lead to increased knowledge and perceived value of the organization in the future by these stakeholders, which is one important factor that can influence the funding Extension receives (Harder et al., 2009, 2013). Additionally, the open-ended responses included extremely positive comments from students about how they were seriously considering a career in Extension after the event. This finding is also consistent with previous research that determined that exposing students to opportunities in Extension could lead to awareness of career opportunities in Extension (Henley et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2001). In some comments of this study's qualitative data, forward-thinking sentiments were used in reference to careers in Extension. These comments could mean student(s) were considering future goals or outcomes related to careers in Extension and supports the theory suggested by Lent and Brown (1996).

A public relations seminar is another method to engage undergraduate students in Extension, in addition to research and internships identified in previous research (Henley et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2001). Moreover, a public relations seminar may be less cumbersome on communication units and could reach more students than other proposed methods. This model of approaching public relations at the state or university level leverages Extension specialists as brand advocates for Extension as a whole, which has been recommended in previous research (Zagonel et al., 2019). When investigating students' interest in pursuing careers in Extension, the specialty area of the Extension specialist could have impacted students differently. For example, if a student

that participated in the event was interested in nursery crop production and heard the Extension specialist discuss how this topic was applied and used in Extension, the student may be more interested in pursuing Extension as a career option (Lent et al., 1993). Additionally, public relations events that target undergraduate students would allow Extension to identify students who are passionate about Extension and could be effective brand ambassadors throughout their lives as future professionals or future clients (Ebner et al., 2017; Zagonel et al., 2019).

Recommendations

Based on this study's findings, future research should be conducted to follow up with students who participated in the public relations seminar examined to understand better the long-term impacts the event had on students. It would be valuable to understand if the students did pursue careers in Extension and how they apply Extension in their lives. Specifically, conducting another quasi-experimental study with college students during their first year and then a follow-up during their fourth or final year could be useful. Another way to better understand the long-term impacts of public relations on students' perceptions of Extension would be to evaluate students' organization-public relationship with Extension using the six indicators (Hon & Grunig, 1999). While this study supports the short-term impacts of public relations, long-term impacts are more likely to lead to changes in behavior and influence attitudes (Ki & Hon, 2007). Better understanding students' perceptions of the organization-public relationship with Extension will also allow scholars and communication practitioners to understand better what elements of the relationship, such as satisfaction or trust, should be improved (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Future research should also seek to understand better students' motivation for seeking careers in Extension in order to gain professionals that are effective ambassadors of Extension's brand.

It is recommended that Extension professionals apply public relations measurements to their evaluation and reporting procedures in an attempt to quantify their impact on relationships and/or historical challenges in Extension (Lamm et al., 2013). Extension professionals and communication practitioners should seek to implement more public relations events that target students as they continue to build public relations campaigns that communicate Extension's brand to broad audiences. Public relations strategies, similar to the seminar used in this study, could be a vehicle to allow Extension to build relationships with future industry stakeholders, residents, or elected officials. These relationships are mutually beneficial as stakeholders share the mission of Extension with the broader public and inform Extension professionals on program needs, priorities, and delivery.

It is recommended that other Extension programs seeking to implement a similar public relations seminar replicate the major components included in this seminar (importance of the land-grant mission, available resources and programs from across Extension, specific programs and resources, and career opportunities). It is also recommended that the attributes of the speaker be similar. In this case, the presenter was extremely passionate about Extension and was a true

brand advocate for the organization as a whole. She was able to pull examples from her work that connected with students in a range of areas, not just her specific specialty area.

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