

SONYA DESSERAULT
Brand Story

20
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Dana M. Ray

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BRAND STORY

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YOUR STORY:

Freedom

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YOUR WHY: *to be free*

Your heartbeat is deep in freedom. You know what it means to be yourself and to stand on your own ground. You've acted on this heartbeat your entire life. It's what drives you to create and to keep your independence and to make your own way forward.

When asked, you said that your best memories of being free included the following:

“When I learned that I got the full scholarship to go to Spain and I was running in the streets with my coat half undone in March, happiness in my heart and not a care in the world.”

“When I ran behind the farm on that mini-hill and screamed at the sky at the top of my lungs... moments like that. “

“Having the wind in my hair.

“Breathing...”

“Late night dancing with someone I trust and I just depart into the song for another world.”

Full. Unhindered. Self-expression. No judgement. No restrictions. A sense of transgression. Breaking rules that should be broken.

To DANCE with FEAR

The other side to that bright and breezy self is a lot of hard work and a lot of dancing with fear. You are not afraid of reckoning with the hard parts of life and do so with great vulnerability, something often missing in professional contexts. In fact, your vulnerability and honesty is what often attracts people to you.

You noted that:

“In truth, I feel like I touch freedom sometimes but I still have to get rid of so many fears... I often feel locked in my body. Like I want to get up and dance, but it’s a restaurant and you can’t... I always felt that if there was someone with me, not even doing, but witnessing then it gave credit to it or allowed it.”

There is fear and there is work you are still doing. Fear has been present for you throughout your journey and you’ve learned to dance with you. And being in relationships with friends, other dancers, and family who help you be free: that is critical. You are best at facing fear when someone is with you.

COLLABORATION



Freedom and the work to find freedom underpins your interest in using collaborations across dance styles. This is critical for your creative soul and your business. You love to work with creative people and create alongside them. Working with people and for people is one of your greatest joys

West coast swing is your dance because it allows for so much freedom, both in self-expression and stylistic diversity. *And you also love to experience other forms and bring that life into your work.*

Your favorite moment of this so far being on a TV show in Montreal where you had to dance with the guys that were training. There was a choreographer, a makeup artist, a hair and costume person—you were supported at every step of the way.

“It’s the only time I felt like I could be ‘just a dancer’... not have to be in charge of everything that I don’t even feel qualified to do!”

You want to do work that supports you fully. So you can fully be who you are: a dancer.

FREING FOLLOWS

It is painful to you to see dancers not be free. And it is painful to see dancers written off dancers because they don't fit in the standard narratives of "partnership". So now, you are focusing on equipping female follow. It aligns with your journey in dance. It is also a place where freedom can be the most elusive in the dance community. Freedom doesn't come through partnership but in freeing themselves. You described it the following way:

"Freedom for follows is when they own their body and their dancing, no matter the level and you see this radiant energy coming out of them. And it's not in the way that a lot of people think; it's not when you don't give a shit about anything. It's when you know you are ok where you are. It's when you know that you taking the space doesn't take away from anybody else's space."

The opposite of this is when followers shut their body down and try to be "good."

"Being a 'good follow' almost always equates to doing exactly what the leaders want, complying, being a good docile, yes human being deferred to someone. Going too far on one end when something doesn't work; and then going crazy because they were told they were too technical but it's not genuine; and then not doing anything cause they were told they were too crazy. It's when a follower has their head everywhere except the here and now."

You know there is freedom on the other side of that process. You want to be part of it and know you can offer a unique contribution to this conversation around following and what it's for.



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kasabutsk

A HISTORY

The following article gets at some of the unique points in your story and how much you worked to train for what you wanted. Freedom for you is not a life absent of work but the gift at the end of the hard work. Your work is to bring freedom--and dance is your favorite way to do that.

A History: By Dana Ray, March 2017

Sonya Dessureault is a badass.

Let's start here: Sonya didn't start dancing until the end of high school. "The closest thing to dance training I'd ever had was some community classes in a church basement," she said. It was entirely for leisure but it interested her. "I was a great student. I got top scores in everything. And I was bored."

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At age 15, she did an exchange program in Spain. The experience changed everything for her. "I didn't want to finish school, I wanted to explore the world." Regular academic success wasn't enough. So when it was time to choose a two year pre-college program, she decided to do a two year dance program with no prior training. It was the first real exposure to dance she'd had. Dance was more challenging than the schoolwork she'd been doing.

Academia wasn't for Sonya. With high school over, she hitched a ride from Montreal out to Hamilton and worked on an organic farm for two years. True to what her soul needed, Sonya found dancing nearby. This time it was hip hop and she trained locally for the two years she lived there. "I didn't even know what organic even meant when I got there," Sonya said. "I went for two months which became two years." But after several years, she knew that farming wasn't the life for her. "After 3 years and exploring the west coast of Canada, I miss dance too much. I can't do farming I have to go back. I took my last money and bought a bus ticket back to Montreal."

That's when salsa happened.

There was a free outdoor lesson in a park the summer she returned. She was hooked by the differences in partner dancing and started looking for work. She found a small studio that needed someone to watch the front desk and she exchanged some of her time for lessons. A few months later, she entered her first salsa competition and not long after that started teaching.

It might surprise you that Sonya started in salsa. But actually, more and more west coast swing dancers are coming from other styles. There's an open door that west coast offers. It so readily embraces other styles and personalities.

When Sonya found west coast swing, she said, "That's my dance." It happened when she saw a video of Jordan and Tatiana perform at a salsa congress. But there wasn't a lot of west coast in Montreal at the time; it was clear that if she wanted to dance west coast she'd have to travel to the US to learn it.

This is how bad she wanted it: she rented out her bedroom in her apartment and lived in the laundry room. The extra income helped cover expenses to go to events and keep learning.

The side perk to renting the room is that Jerome Subey became her tennant along with Stephane Dominguez, with whom she taught with and performed an early routine. Together, they started training 3 hours a day in the apartmetn, learning and practicing and trying to get better. She didn't place in novice for about six months since she was training alone and didn't know what she was doing.

A History cont.

“It was the Royston Intensive that changed things. They still have running jokes about this. I asked so many questions.” It opened her mind to what the dance was and what it could be. She went from a social dancer to a competitor. In a year and a half, she became an All Star dancer.

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Sonya and Stephen started competing together in 2013. They met at Liberty Swing and later danced a strictly together at Summer Hummer. Sonya became well known in Europe; Stephen was well known in the US circuit. Together, they started teaching all around the globe, helping build the international following for west coast swing.

In addition to her fierce competition skills—just see any recent J&J or the intense classic performance at the U.S. Open last November for proof—Sonya is a dedicated instructor. As a teacher, Sonya values full comprehension. “Want to make people understand things. If I don’t understand it I can’t do it.” Sonya is definitely technical. She’s honest and clear but still positive. “There’s no point in putting people down,” she said. “Dance is about having fun. Come and learn, have a light bulb moment, have fun. Then everything is there.”

Coaching is her favorite role of the many hats a teacher can wear. “A coach makes sense of everything you hear. If you don’t have someone to help it make sense.” And having something be usable and practical for a dancer is her goal in every instance.

Between teaching and competing, Sonya’s life takes her around the globe. She’s also investing in a multi-year training in naturopathy and was certified in yoga last summer. “People told me I couldn’t have everything. But I did get everything. I travel the world, I dance, I teach, I make ends meet, and I have great friends. This is my everything.”

“Sonya is the definition of what I call a true artist. Edgy and always a step ahead of her time, she stops at nothing when it comes to delivering the best in her artistry.”



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YOUR AUDIENCE:

Female Follows

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AUDIENCE

Now, as you launch out on your own, you see a huge market gap for female follows without regular partners. This is a significant portion of dance populations and one that is not addressed for their specific needs and challenges. And there are questionable frameworks introduced to inexperienced follows that can pose real barriers an average instructor doesn't have the skills, time, or experience to address effectively

This is where you come in. You understand this experience from several different perspectives and wanted to create something that would empower the voices of women everywhere. You've also never believed the bullshit that follows need a regular partner to grow. Partnership has never defined your story with dance even while you've been part of a partnership, one that was part of a defining and dynamic period of your life. The power of the Partnership story is strong but not one that your free loving spirit needed to excel.

METHODOLOGY

We used interviews and facebook surveys to talk to follows in this position from around the world. We also used your extensive experience to fill in gaps where we couldn't talk to a real person. It was critical to hear about challenges and breakthroughs from the perspective of students rather than the voice and experience of an instructor/guide/coach.

Surveys and Interviews

Three follows were interviewed for thirty minutes each. Facebook questions were answered in comments and primarily in DMs. Some male follows responded to the question but their answers were not included. Questions included:

- What is the biggest challenge you have faced while learning the dance?*
- Have you taken more classes/group/privates with female or male instructors, at what frequency and why?*
- If you had to identify one thing that made the most difference in your growth as a dancer, what would it be?*
- What do you think is the biggest challenge about being a follower without a partner and what do you think is the biggest reward?*

Findings

The following sections will be broken down by the categories of questions we were interested in:

- Challenge**
- Learning Structures**
- Breakthroughs**

Each section includes a word cloud of responses, dominant themes and findings, and a breakdown of all survey results related to that topic.

CHALLENGES, cont.

Body Image

Multiple women noted that their bodies had been a perceived barrier to progressing in the dance. For some, this was comments by early teachers who suggested they couldn't accomplish good technique because of size and shape. There is a normative body type for west coast follows (whether or not we want to say that aloud) and these women have felt less valued because of their natural bodies.

Individuality & Self Expression

Dance was a place to grow in self expression. It drew them to the dance. But learning how to be themselves while dancing (especially at the intersection of body image and other self-stories) felt impossible.

Growth process

Getting regular feedback was hard for follows. In regular communities, the focus tended to be on the skill of the leaders. In privates, the feedback was on a few technical pieces but not part of an overall narrative of growth. Practicing alone was also a hard part for followers. In the community, it's also hard for follows to be accepted and promoted internally to the role of teachers.

Being a "Good Follow"

"I try to be a still lake. I want to be able to receive whatever my lead gives me."

There's confusion around what responsiveness is as a skillset and what it is as a way of being. Follows shut their dancing down as they try to be a "good follow", meaning doing what the leader wants them to do exactly, instead of being themselves and using following as a tool set to do that. This, obviously, has larger cultural implications than simply in dance ability. It's the result of a long training in how to be as a woman with significant implications.

LEARNING, cont.

Group Classes

Cost matters. People are looking for affordable ways to grow in the dance. Group classes are cheaper and allow a single follow to jump in without a partner.

Private Lessons

People are willing and able to pay for private lessons. It's considered a critical path to growth.

Coaching is Valued but Rare

It is also true that coaching is rare. Private lessons allow for an individual dancer to experience input from one way of thinking over the course of an hour. But that doesn't lend coherency in coaching over time and personal relationships to form. It matters that they feel invested in as a person as well as a dancer. Coaching allows that to happen but is hard to find and afford because of the transient nature of pro availability. Pros simply aren't geographically based.

Need for Technique... and a Better Story

They want to grow technically! They want to be equipped and skilled. Leads get technical training earlier and this isn't cutting it for follows. Follows are ready for something more. Beyond the technical, there is also a need for someone to help with the narrative and self-storytelling aspects of the dance that go hand in hand with technical skill.

2.b

PERSONAS

A persona is "shorthand" for every woman you will talk to along your business journey. It's the person you make for and create for and dream for. It's the person who will also pay your bills and feed your creative work. This is the person you are entering into business to serve and your story is all aimed in their direction.

In your case, there are several other audiences that include crossover dance communities and event directors. But your primary brand is centered around this person: the woman who is learning to dance like herself. That is your work.

All of the information in this persona is based on what we know above and helps us determine if what is made in your branding, from web design and web copy to photography to product design, is talking to the right person about the problems that matter the most to them.

2.b

Persona

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Persona #1: **Jen**

a follow



Jen is a mid-journey dancer with a background in ballroom. She came to west coast looking for an experience in connection, communication, and musicality. Ultimately, she realized she was looking for a way to dance like herself but has no real way to tackle this question. While she is in a small dance community, there are not a lot of pros near her to help guide her growth. Or she has not found someone she felt truly comfortable with, someone ready to be vulnerable alongside her and guide the necessary technical growth. In particular, she's really confused about how to grow as a dancer when she doesn't have a regular partner.

She is learning to love herself and be herself through dancing.

PERSONA, cont.

Demographics: Age 23-40, female, disposable income. Population in Northern Europe and North East United States. Came to west coast swing from another dance style. Tends to come from either formal partner styles (ex. ballroom), social partner styles with limited musical range (ex. lindy, salsa), or solo dance backgrounds heavy in technique (ex. ballet, jazz, tap). Attracted to the self expression and diversity in the dance.

Traits/attitudes: Believes in competition as a venue for personal and communal growth, the dance evolves this way and they want to be part of something that evolves. Wants technical guidance as the way to grow. Knows that technique is the way to freedom. Congruency is key to their long term satisfaction in the dance, their bodies, and their lives. Don't want to be "listening" follows but CONTRIBUTING follows. Has been the "still lake" and is over it, experienced pain from it.

Motivations/needs: Regular coaching. Guide to learning alone. Empowering philosophy. Methods to figure out their own style and personality and contribution to the dance.

Calls to Action:

Follow Sonya and work with her as your:

- Coach
- Instructor for your event
- Cross-genre influence for follows finding their own feet in male-dominated dances

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Persona

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Persona #2: **Roy** *event director*



Roy has been dancing for many years and is a known figure in dance circles. Events are one way they contribute to the dance scene. This can be either in west coast swing or in cross over events. Roy isn't as interested in the personal growth side of the dance, or at least wasn't until recently as it's been integrated into more and more events. He's always looking to see what the new trends are and offer services to his attendees.

PERSONA, cont.

Demographics: Male or Female, Age 40-60, in the dance communities for a long while, tends to know a lot of people and knows people in their personal lives as well as professional.

Traits/attitudes: Concerned primarily with creating events that are loved by their audience. They need people to pay money to attend events. This money goes into hiring pros. It matters that they hire pros that people are drawn to be around and work with. The popularity of their event is top priority and so tends to appeal to the mass audience.

This trait might be changing as the community gets big enough to sustain niched events with unique attitudes, experiences, and offers.

Motivations/needs: Run events that please their audiences, whether regional or national. Every event needs something that helps it stand out and the combination of pros that are hired impact that design. This can mean that they don't like to change things up because they think they know what best works.

Calls to Action:

Hire Sonya for your next event and offer niched workshops, intensives, etc. for solo follows. Focus on intensives for follows to build brand and audience.

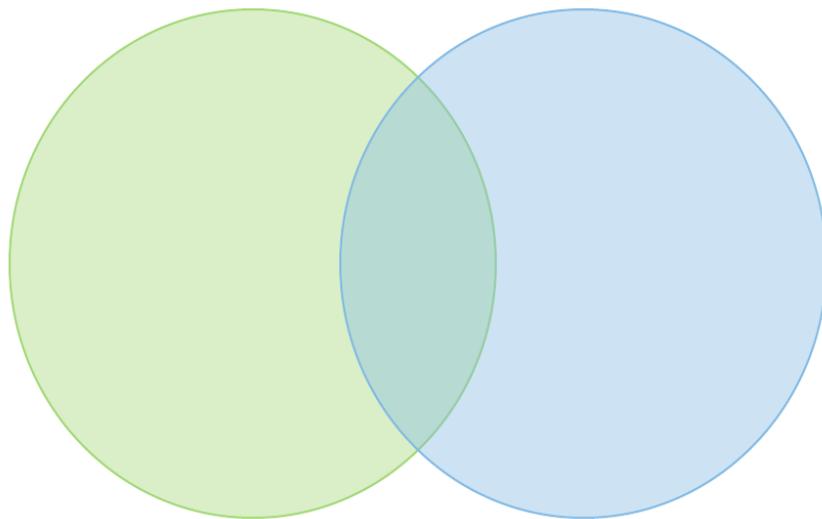
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YOUR BUSINESS:

Where the Stories Meet



WHERE THE STORIES MEET



In this chapter, we'll look at the pain points for your audience and how your story overlaps with theirs. It's like this venn diagram above: where your story meets your audience's story is where your business will emerge and grow.

Follow's Story: Follows who struggle to grow in the mental and technical aspects of the dance without regular input. Struggling to find their voices as dancers.

Your story: A solo female instructor well versed in technical training and coaching alongside personal growth. An instructor who knows what it takes to dance freely.



“Sonya didnt try to make me someone else.”

“Gives to the student what her dance needs at the moments.”

“She is never mean, sometimes just brutally honest. It is awesome!”

“Sonya is a heart-warming true professional dance teacher. She is very good at giving you advice and exercises for your level and to find the things you need to practice to grow as a dancer. Team Sonya for the win!”

“Sonya is one of my favorite instructors because of the depth of her technical knowledge and approach of her teaching. She breaks down to specifics if you need them and as she works with you she continues to push you to do better during her lesson.”

“Working with Sonya has helped me develop my dancing enormously. My understanding of West Coast Swing and how to best use my body to express myself in the dance has deepened to a whole new level. I feel that the combination of her holistic approach to the dance as an art form and attention to technical detail has opened up completely new possibilities for me to improve and create within the dance.”

“I knew it - I had heard about frame gazillions of times but no one quite put it into simple terms that also captured its importance in allowing the entire dance to work.”

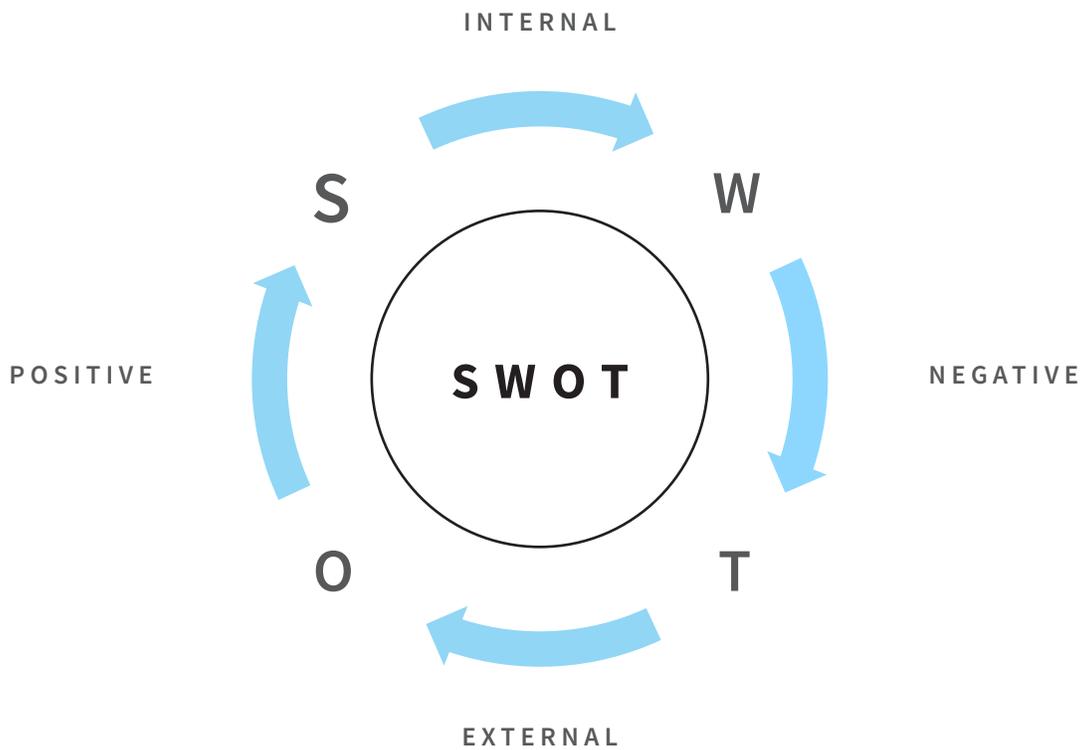
“What I love with you is that you’re always encouraging everyone! We always feel loved when we’re around you. Do never lose that!”

“She consistently delivers great results out of the people who practice what she shows them.”

“Sonya Dessureault is very knowledgable. What I especially like is that she does not shy away from educating you on the multiple different techniques of achieving the same goal and then explaining which one is her preference and why.”

“This way Sonya gives you a broader education on the dance, and this is something I really appreciate about her. She’s also very kind, down-to-earth, and super zen when she’s explaining something. Which I think is really cool and I really appreciate that about her! Go learn from Sonya, you won’t regret it.”

“Somehow Sonya always manages to give me what I need at the moment, regardless of it being a technique exercise or just a different perspective on something I’m struggling with. She gently pushes me out of my comfort zone to make me improve, but with her warm and easy-going attitude it never feels uncomfortable. I highly recommend her for both group classes, privates and continuous coaching.”



strengths

Technical excellence as dancer and instructor.
Experienced in the mental and emotional narrative around dance.
Trained instruction.
Talent for creating drills for solo dancers.
Highly beloved by edgy, art driven dancers.
Deeply authentic and congruent as a person.
Cross trained in other dance styles.

weaknesses

New to digital spaces.
Cultural narratives around ended partnerships.
The emotional overhead of starting over.

opportunities

Female follows that lack input and empowerment.
New digital platforms for teaching and story telling.
Creating and telling new narratives around partnership and empowerment in dancing.

threats

Belief by female follows that they need a male instructor to break through in their dancing.
Other instructors starting to innovate in digital spaces.
Solo female dancers not hired as frequently as partnered dancers.
Limited perspective of event directors.

MARKETING MESSAGING

Below is marketing content based on the research and findings outlined in this document.

CATEGORY	CONTENT
Sonya's Why	To be free.
Pain Point	Jen: Lack of resources to grow. Roy: Hiring dynamic staff.
Marketing Positioning	Technical training grounded in healthy mental approaches and mental narratives. Training that allows follows to be free in their dancing and access full self-expression and joy.
Call to Action	Contact Sonya for coaching, lessons, hire for event.
Messaging	Jen: Break through your barriers and dance like you. Roy: Bring an instructor in who can approach the dance from many different directions, especially aimed at equipping follows.



TAGLINE

Dance Free

This tagline, while simple, captures everything you hope to do in west coast swing and as a dance professional. It's what you want to do as a coach for others. It's what you want to do with your performances and your storytelling. It's also outwardly directed: YOU can dance free. It's a possibility to explore and offer and share with others.

CONCLUSION

What comes next can only be described as a true adventure. You are looking at creating new products and disrupting old methods and stories. And you are niching yourself for a group of people who have time, money, and commitment—and no one creating for them. Female follows are ready to grow and be trained. It's about female empowerment—and it's about enabling the dance you love so much to keep developing new ways.

There are follows ready to dance like themselves. You are a role model with the skill and passion and personality to speak into a new market.

You also now have a solid foundation for building the rest of your materials. Your branding must reflect this story: the look and feel of FREEDOM.

Remember: this document is a living document. It reflects what we know TODAY and that will change as you keep moving. It will be worth revising and reworking this document on a yearly basis as you know your audience more.

There's so much possibility and potential. And it will keep evolving as time goes.

GO. Just go. You have everything you need.

Dana M. Ray

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Dana M. Ray Consulting centers on this idea: that bringing congruency and alignment between the things we make and the central-story of who we are is critical for doing the work that matters.

Dana's background is all about clear storytelling, first as a personal statement coach and then as a narrative marketer. She has a Masters in English Literature and Writing from Bucknell University and was a Fulbright Scholar in Bulgaria.

Her Why: To help you tell your story so you can do the work that matters.

why we do
what we do

Dana M. Ray

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