

Building a Best-of-Class Branding Consultancy Brand

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ASPATORE

Introduction: A Little about Me and My Life at Landor

I am the former chief marketing officer for Landor Associates, one of the largest and oldest branding and design firms in the world. At Landor, where I worked for nineteen years, my primary job was to oversee all marketing worldwide for the agency. At the time I left the firm in spring of 2014, Landor had grown to twenty-four offices, with some 750 people in nineteen countries. My global Marketing Communications team and I were responsible for leading and coordinating all major Landor marketing initiatives and helping with business development across the different offices. The team itself resided in both New York and San Francisco, with direct responsibility for managing the website, our global outreach efforts, our public relations agency and programs, and leading and managing any marketing initiatives that were executed on a cross-office scale. In addition to that, I was the senior executive leader on major branding programs for such clients as the World Trade Center, the Moody's Foundation, Concern Worldwide, New York-Presbyterian Hospital, and Hartford Healthcare, plus countless other projects over the years.

One of the more interesting aspects of my position was that I essentially held a dual role managing the marketing of a relatively small but highly respected B2B (business-to-business) company while also advising Fortune 500 clients on their own branding and marketing. This meant I often wore two hats, one being to understand how to market a small professional services business to a high-level B2B audience and the other helping clients position and market themselves from a branding perspective.

Selling in the Annual Marketing Strategy and Plan

For Landor, the process of starting the yearly marketing plan begins right around mid-summer. In September we usually performed a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis of some kind, including a competitive assessment, then evaluated our core priorities from a marketing standpoint, including those initiatives we generally do year in and year out, and what our upside opportunities were. We would also look at what programs we wanted to do that budgets or resources had prevented us from accomplishing in the past, plus new ideas and initiatives we wanted to try.

The Marketing Communications team would then submit a budget that, of course, always totaled more than what the corporation had to spend, leading to the traditional negotiating dance through the fall, with much back and forth with finance and the chief executive officer before finally winnowing the wish list down to the most critical priorities.

The primary leaders of the strategic planning process from the Marketing Communications side would be myself and the corporate communications and digital marketing heads, but we would also work closely with Knowledge Sharing, essentially the webmaster, whose team was responsible for actually making all digital efforts happen. They are more of an information technology function at Landor but have always worked closely with the marketing group so the team would ultimately be in synch. Then we would present our recommendations to our chief financial officer and chief executive officer as well as the chief talent officer. We would also make sure we involved the rest of the marketing managers and managing directors for each of Landor's offices and regions in the dialogue. This would include sending out questionnaires asking for their special priorities and needs. "Listening to the field" is always a critical success factor in any marketing program.

When to Update Your Marketing Strategy

There are a number of different, sometimes conflicting, issues at work in the development of any marketing plan. First, there is always the struggle for resources and budgets that rarely increase. The Landor marketing team prided itself on getting more efficient about what we did; in some ways we actually did more with less every year, but that was a reality we had to deal with. Obviously social media has changed marketing for everyone and we were no different at Landor. Used judiciously, it can be very cost-effective, whether keeping the company Facebook page up to date, leveraging alumnae groups on LinkedIn, or pushing thought leaders in the firm to blog and tweet about relevant topics on a regular basis. We evolved Landor towards two primary selling tools. First and foremost is Landor.com, which is updated monthly with new topic areas. Depending on the subject for that month, the team makes sure relevant white papers and case studies are accessible on the web. Secondly, there is outreach through an emailed alert called "On Deck," which is distributed to the firm's entire database

highlighting that month's website topic area with links to the key stories being featured. All of that was developed within the last two to three years. It clearly does not involve any type of physical send-out at all—it is all digital. So that made a big difference in terms of generating relevant visibility to a targeted audience on a regular basis. There are a number of other selling materials created that are also primarily digitally distributed.

Rebranding a Branding Firm

Landor actually retooled its brand about five years ago, and my team and I led that effort. It was very much the classic “cobbler's children” scenario wherein the agency is terrific at recommending and delivering great branding solutions to its clients, but pretty resource challenged when it came to addressing its own branding needs. In the end, we changed our brand signature typography very modestly but our house style underwent a fairly dramatic makeover. That was a big initiative and took a lot of people's time, with no shortage of opinions shared in the process. Changing the website was even more painful for a company heavily populated by world-class designers. Needless to say, it was difficult to get agreement on all of the necessary components. At some point in these situations, one actually has to stop listening to all the opinions and say, “No, this is what we are going to do,” and simply get the job done.

About 2010 the social side of digital became really important, as did interactivity between companies and their constituents—meaning Landor itself, its clients, and its partners—which significantly included all of the nearly 200 firms in the WPP Inc. universe, of which Landor is one small part.

There are many other major advertising, public relations, direct marketing, research, and digital agencies that work alongside Landor or partner with them on multiple projects. Most of these are within the WPP family, but others are outside as well. They are a major constituency and audience for Landor marketing, since much of what the firm does for its clients ultimately must interact with their other communications agencies. Then there is the critical internal audience: Landor employees themselves. To attract and inspire them, it was recognized that Landor.com had to become a much more engaging and creative site. To accomplish this, Landor partnered with VML, one of WPP's leading digital agencies. Together, we created the site that is

today's Landor.com, which is extremely interactive. The firm earned numerous awards from it and has tracked significant increases in visits, interaction time, and all of the other standard measures that indicate it is a well-used and regarded resource. That whole process took about a year—and not a few gray hairs on the part of most of us involved.

We had a clear vision and a good partner, but we pushed ourselves to be technologically advanced at the time because it needed to truly sell Landor's competence and understanding of the medium as well as provide strong, compelling content. When you get to the bleeding edge, it can often make for extreme challenges in getting everything to work as planned. We pushed the boundaries, in some cases farther than maybe the technology was ready to go at the time, with virtually every corner of the site serving as an active design element. But we got it done and, I think, set a new standard for our competitors. Which only means, of course, that someone is going to have to update it again in due course as others start to copy it. A website is like a retail storefront, after all—it must be kept fresh and engaging, which means nearly constant reimagining and engineering.

Keeping the Marketing Strategy in Synch with Current Trends

I do not know if anyone is truly up to date these days, because the very meaning of “up to date” is so rapidly changing and so intangible that it is a constantly moving target. Landor may have big visibility in terms of the work it creates, but it is small in terms of sheer numbers. This creates resource issues, as no medium-sized firm can afford twenty people working on its corporate marketing—it is simply impractical. Like any smart firm, the company tries to keep abreast of trends and competitive actions using the resources it has. That said, there are really only five or six branding and design firms in the world that would be considered to be true Landor peers. They are all good at what they do and are respected rivals, but there is no vast universe of firms capable of handling big-league clients with complex branding challenges. Moreover, with corporate brands in particular, effective solutions must usually endure for ten to twenty years at minimum—it is cost prohibitive for big corporations to redo signage, uniforms, product templates, and systems around the world to accommodate frequent logo updates. Purely trendy ideas cannot support that kind of gravitas and longevity, so good firms generally recommend sustainable ideas and design solutions that are timeless versus timely.

From an internal database standpoint, Landor was among the first in its industry to create a wholly owned system that tracked all of its clients and prospects back in 1999 and 2000. This databank has continuously evolved, but now with standardized software like Salesforce.com and all of the other non-proprietary CRM systems that virtually anybody can buy, the challenge is whether to fix what exists or invest in the next new thing. It is a tough call, as all options are time-consuming and expensive, yet essential to staying technologically relevant and maintaining a strong business development program.

Areas of Strength in Marketing Strategy

I think a core strength of Landor's marketing strategy has always been its consistent focus on being the preeminent idea and design leader in its category. This gets reinforced via the updated website every month and the wide range of papers, thought pieces, media quotes, articles, and awards the firm produces and earns throughout each year. I would go so far as to say Landor has some of the best—in terms of quality and accessibility—intellectual capital available in the branding world right now.

And it is not just about fresh content, but also how it is coordinated. Landor.com is like a digital magazine, with each new centerpiece supported by ancillary stories, cases, and white papers on the website every month. That takes real work. But it generates noticeable bumps in traffic every time it is updated. There are great anecdotal comments too, from people saying, "I thought your article or case on this or that was great." The other major marketing initiative is a print piece, which is distributed to thousands of prospects, clients, and partners every year. It is called *Perspectives*, and it is an annual compendium of the best articles, thought pieces, white papers, research, and reports published by Landor people around the world every year. It is even available as an iBook, free for downloading (via the iBooks app), along with a very cool soft-cover version that is attractively and intelligently designed and printed. This book gets tremendous response when it is distributed each year.

Managing Breakthrough Creativity and Strategic Rigor

Landor has been around for nearly seventy-five years. It started as a packaging design firm, but it was always about taking a thoughtful approach

to how design impacts a customer's decisions. Walter Landor understood that the design business needed to be customer-driven. He did a great deal of research to better comprehend what they responded to visually and verbally in brand and packaging design.

Today, some of Landor's branding is more creatively oriented while other clients are more strategically driven. But the firm has always striven to be at the intersection of those two disciplines. Creative intelligence is about balancing the cutting edge of creativity and strategic rigor for a productive result. That is a hard place to stay. It is extremely difficult because if you stray too far into the creative side, you start to lose credibility from a business perspective and clients start to think of you as the company with the color crayons that does logos. If you go too far into the strategy side, however, you lose that defining and differentiating element of what defines a world-class design firm. In the end, we all gravitate to the tangible, physical manifestation of an idea, whether it is a logo, a physical space, a product, a set of compelling words, or a well-designed web page.

Difficult as this balance is to maintain, I have long believed it was the right place for Landor and it is historically where they have always led. It is a perspective I think most clients want and need: the confluence of great strategic thinking and truly creative solutions that help them build their business. Simple to say; hard to do.

B2B Targeting

Landor is exclusively a B2B firm. It sells only to other organizations that need design and branding help. There are probably some 5,000 to 10,000 people in the world who could actually buy what Landor and its key competitors deliver because it really has to be the chief marketing officer, chief executive officer, or senior marketing director of a Fortune 1000 organization who has the authority (and the budget) to authorize a major branding initiative. This list can also include ambitious non-profits and institutional clients, plus the occasional well-funded start-up, but it is generally mid- to large-sized corporations that have the means to invest in what first-tier branding firms cost and take advantage of the broad range of services they offer. This is a fairly finite world. Given that reality, targeting can and should be reasonably precise. But, at the same time, it is prudent to

reach more broadly when possible to attract first-rate talent and other potential influencers, including academics, partner firms (ad and public relations agencies), local and national government services, non-government organizations, and even professional organizations serving the industry. In the end, a solid new business opportunity can emerge from virtually anywhere, so the importance of high-profile networking, speaking engagements, and frequent press mentions in business-related media should never be underestimated.

Keeping the Message Current

It is difficult to ensure that any brand messaging remains long on point in view of constantly evolving trends and technologies. It means keeping ears open and hiring people of all cultures and backgrounds, so the firm's output stays relevant yet not overtly trendy. Major industry conferences are a good way to stay attuned to what is going on in the rest of the world and what best practices are deemed to be. The annual ANA Masters of Marketing conference is a great forum for this, as are other industry conferences like TED and numerous design and branding-focused events. In recent years, for example, Landor has enjoyed great success at the annual Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity, winning coveted Lions for outstanding brand design work, including the first ever award given out for product design in 2014. For this latter honor, a Landor team created an innovative design for the recycling cans in New York's Central Park on behalf of the Central Park Conservancy. Not a typical "branding" project, to be sure, but it says volumes about non-traditional thinking and innovation at Landor. An achievement I suspect even Walter Landor himself would have been proud to celebrate.

The Challenge of "Brand-Speak" and Keeping Our Meaning Clear

One common problem in the branding world is that everybody uses—and misuses—the same language. Branding itself is a much abused term. People in and out of the industry now use the word daily, yet I would argue few of them truly know what it means. Most think it simply refers to a logo. So, it is desirable to stay fresh in our language but, at the same time, if you get too advanced or trendy and continually invent new, "proprietary" words for fairly standard practices, people will not know what you are talking about.

This is especially critical for tools like search engine optimization, where we need to use accepted terminology to ensure our websites are at the top of the search list. Landor's Marketing Communications team takes pains to avoid the overly trite terms we hear so often in our business while making sure the most common terminology is at least visible on its site. This means screening every published story, case study, or white paper to make certain they do not fall back on clichéd phrases or indecipherable jargon. That takes quite a bit of time, but the goal is to make certain Landor practices what it preaches to its clients. Importantly, effective use of language is, in large part, driven by its audience. Landor must connect its messaging with chief marketing officers and chief executive officers—seasoned pros who generally possess a highly tuned “BS radar” and are not overly impressed with brand cant.

Successful Modes of Marketing

Ironically, for most advertising, public relations, and branding service firms, the cost of actually *advertising* in appropriate business and trade press, whether print or online, is usually prohibitive. Few agencies can rationalize investing hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars in *Wall Street Journal* and *Fortune* ads. It has therefore long been my strong belief that good public relations, properly managed and executed, is one of the best weapons in a B2B marketer's arsenal. We employed this strategy behind Landor, seeking to get the firm's experts quoted and mentioned often in the right places, on the right topics. This approach was then bolstered by the intellectual capital and thought leadership materials distributed via the website and other vehicles, including direct mailings.

The historic challenge with marketing in general and especially in B2B marketing for professional services, of course, is to know how and where one's efforts are paying off. It is extremely difficult to measure success outright because one of the first problems is defining what “success” really means in a marketing campaign. The obvious answer is “increased sales,” naturally, but most professional service relationships are the result of a very long and considered purchase by the client—in the case of branding services, usually involving the entire client C-suite, from the chief executive officer and chief marketing officer down to the head of sales or development, plus human resources, procurement, regional marketing leaders, and sometimes

even the information technology department. No one ad or public relations-planted story or quote can guarantee a result like that, and tracing direct leads from virtually any marketing initiative is rarely easy.

What *can* be measured is general awareness, whether prospects and clients can play back differentiating characteristics for the firm, the volume of website hits and what is being looked at and downloaded most frequently, and even anecdotal comments from target audiences who receive send-outs and mailings. Fairly soft data, usually, but useful nonetheless.

Still, if you took a poll tomorrow of leading marketers of the world and asked them to name three global branding firms, it is unlikely (in my experience) they would come up with more than one, if any. Over the past twenty years, our best information suggested only about 10 to 20 percent of the B2B Fortune 1000 population knows who is who in the branding world. This is largely because, for the most part, clients only think about branding firms when they need them. And most companies in the B2B space are not rebranding more than once a decade at most. This is somewhat different among consumer packaged good companies where brand “refreshes” are a requirement to stimulate awareness and relevance in the minds of consumers. Branding firms like Landor, who have large consumer packaging design capabilities, may therefore be a bit better known among marketing professionals because of the nearly constant demand for new thinking and design in packaging.

Use of Social Media

In my new life as an independent marketing consultant, LinkedIn has already become a lynchpin for HA Roth Consulting. The price is right and virtually everyone I need to connect with is on it. There is a Landor alumni group on LinkedIn the agency has actively engaged so they are kept up to speed on what the organization is doing and to build a potential network referral base. Landor itself is also active on Facebook and Twitter and explores all the latest social networking tools as appropriate. This requires having people within the firm responsible for managing its visibility every day in the social media world and being aware of trends and topics of relevant interest. If there is a new case study or substantive piece of news or a public relations announcement, Landor’s Marketing Communications team is very facile at getting the word out through its various channels.

Shifting Customer Attitudes toward Marketing Strategies

I think there are a number of inherent complexities in the marketing of branding services, especially on the corporate side. Unless a company is going through a major merger or acquisition/divestiture, or has a new chief executive officer, is experiencing a sea change in their industry (i.e., Apple introduces a smart phone and turns that category upside down), or faces some major shift in their competitive set (see above), corporations generally are not especially interested in what a Landor or its competitors are selling. They may need advertising, digital marketing, and public relations on a consistent basis, but branding tends to be project and event driven.

It can also be episodic in terms of who firms talk to and when. Landor has sought to broaden its appeal to prospects by expanding its range of services and product lines—trying to make sure they are not just seen as logo designers because there is so much more to branding than creating logos. When looking at the range of articles available on Landor.com, many are about brand strategy and portfolio management, environmental innovation, and brand engagement, which is internal branding. This latter is a critical element in successful, brand-led business cultures. How do you get employees aligned around the corporate brand story in ways that are relevant to their daily jobs and their interaction with customers and suppliers? It is not about changing the logo; it is getting the workforce to become real brand ambassadors. That broadens the conversation with clients and prospects and even gets into the corporate human resource department. It is a terrific door opener—and it helps keep it open long after the design process is completed.

Staying Up to Date with Marketing Trends

I was a creative writing major in college and have spent much of my career practicing and, I hope, perfecting the art of professional business writing. There is a website called *Ragan.com* that I read religiously because it has daily tips largely related to public relations ideas and writing skills. It covers social media trends and a broad range of communications-related topics, from how to plan a career in communications, to writing good cover letters and résumés, to search engine optimization tips, and words to use, lose, and not misuse. It also has a great deal of good information for young people on

how to handle their first interviews, etc. I regularly recommend it to anyone serious about the marketing communications business.

In addition, I obviously pay attention to world and business news, whether through CNN or the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. I get *Crain's New York Business* digital update every day, whose format lists “ten things you need to know” in the city. Though I do not get *Ad Age* and *Adweek* anymore, I would certainly urge anyone in the advertising industry to make sure they read them often. *The Hub* is a publication targeted to senior marketers that is published every other month; I think they do a good job of informing high-level audiences of best practices in our business from a chief marketing officer perspective. Landor has long been an active participant in conferences and, of course, the Association of National Advertisers is virtually a must for professional networking. They have an annual Masters of Marketing meeting that Landor has attended for the past six years or so. We would attend this massive event (some 1,600 agency and client participants) and make detailed notes on each speaker, which we would then share internally and with clients. In three days you can listen to best-in-class marketers presenting whatever they are doing to build their brands. By the time you walk out of there, you are pretty well aware of what is hot and what is not in the world of marketing.

Return on Investment of an Up-to-Date Marketing Strategy

There can be no return on investment if a company does not keep its marketing strategy up to date and reasonably funded in the first place. Marketing is too often looked upon as an “expense” versus an investment and is quick to be cut when times get lean. Yet it is good marketing that keeps the firm’s name visible among its target audiences and its message relevant and well communicated—which is an essential preamble to virtually any sale.

Companies like Landor grow and prosper through a very sophisticated, consultative selling process. Marketing cannot offer a “buy one, get one free” direct sales incentive in our business. Its purpose, rather, is to generate informed awareness among the right audience, open some doors, and create a going-in preference, if possible. In military terms, one might call it “ground softening.” We decided some time ago that, given the project-driven nature of the branding business, we had to ensure the right people

were aware of who Landor was and what they did so when the time came to seek branding help, they knew who to call. Usually there are at least four or five firms in our field that prospects are talking to about a given assignment. Marketing's job is to make certain Landor is one of those being considered. Once invited to pitch, it is up to the pitch team to have the information, insights, ideas, and, we hope, inspired presentation necessary to win the business. There are, needless to say, many factors that go into actually winning a pitch once invited. But about all a good marketing program can do in our industry is to bring the horse to the water. The pitch team is responsible for getting it to drink.

Yet, because the actual pitch process is so critical to agency success, several years ago Landor's Marketing Communications team engaged Relationship Audits and Management, a British firm that specializes in client/agency relationship assessment. They would provide us post-pitch-decision win/loss reports for most of our major new business efforts, based on professional, third party interviews. These were very helpful in understanding both what may have gone wrong and/or what the agency did right in the actual new business process, including the actual presentations. A good tool for course-correcting problems and essential for a firm like Landor, which engages in multiple new business pitches every week around the world.

But all of these evaluative tools cost money—especially quantitative and qualitative market research. So the question of finding out what our prospects and customers think invariably devolved to “Do we spend money to learn what outside perceptions of the firm are or do we spend that same money hiring a new designer or business development person who might directly impact sales? Or should we invest that money in evaluating *current* customer relationships?” Because the real economics of the marketing communications agency business demonstrate over and over again that the most efficient way to grow billings is through one's existing clients. A happy client is usually a good partner who is seeing positive results from the relationship—and they tend to then invest more money in the agency's work.

There are some sophisticated ways of evaluating ongoing client/agency relationships, and we employed Relationship Audits and Management at Landor for some help here as well. This involved both online polling of clients as well as qualitative interviews resulting in detailed reports. Of

course, all of this data and the insights it produces are only valuable if the client team chooses to actively apply the learning. The most successful agencies recognize this, fortunately, and are using these tools to make sure they are listening properly to their clients and offering the kind and caliber of service that has been promised and is expected.

Greatest Challenges in Maintaining an Up-to-Date Strategy

The greatest challenge in virtually any marketing-driven organization is the perpetual tendency to diminish resources, get by with smaller teams, and place bigger demands on constantly demonstrating return on investment—proving that marketing initiatives are driving business. It is hard to maintain enthusiasm and inspire new thinking when there are internal “experts” who challenge every expense and question every marketing program. At the same time, without results, marketing is a luxury, hence the constant need for justification.

In my new life at HA Roth Consulting, a very small business thus far, my biggest challenge is now to generate awareness of HA Roth selectively among potential clients, build on whatever reputation I have managed to develop over the last forty years I have been in the business, and leverage my limited personal resources. Essentially the same strategy we operated against at Landor, but now at a micro level. I cannot afford advertising but I do plan to be aggressive about what I offer by way of LinkedIn and other outlets (like this book). I will undoubtedly do some digital outreach for certain opportunities. It is still the constant challenge of where one best applies resources to assure the most bang for every buck.

Key Takeaways

- One of the hardest things to do in the marketing communications business is to focus on the central selling proposition or the “central point” of your business. If you do not have a focal point, you will not be able to communicate effectively to a prospect. This is sometimes called the “elevator speech” or pitch; we all need one, whatever we do.
- Marketers must balance creativity and strategic rigor to ensure consumers understand both the strength of a world-class idea in its

creative representation as well as believe the company will be able to deliver on its promise.

- Being disciplined about target marketing is essential, but do not forget to focus first on your employees—if they get and embrace the brand, your job as a marketer becomes exponentially easier because they are your best brand salespeople. It is *they* who deliver the brand promise, every day.
- Marketing tools and techniques are in an ever-escalating state of flux. The demand for new ideas and new ways to communicate them will therefore only accelerate. Yet the fundamentals of sound branding—a clear proposition; creative inspiration tempered by strategic discipline; focused, informed targeting; and a passionate commitment to keeping your promise to your customers— have never been more essential.

Hayes Roth is founder and principal of HA Roth Consulting LLC (harothconsulting.com), a marketing consulting firm specializing in strategic positioning, brand development, and client/agency relationship building. Previously, he spent nineteen years at Landor, one of the world's most respected branding and design firms. For the last twelve of those years, he created and then led Landor's global marketing team, responsible for marketing and business development initiatives across the firm's twenty-four offices worldwide. While at Landor, he also led branding programs for Cleveland Clinic, Columbia University, IIT, New York Stock Exchange, Panasonic, Citi, the Council on Foreign Relations, the PGA of America, Hartford HealthCare, the United Negro College Fund, the World Trade Center, and the Moody's Foundation, among many others.

Prior to joining Landor in 1995, Mr. Roth ran his first marketing services company, Roth Marketing Communications Inc., with clients including the Perrier Group, Price Waterhouse, and T. Rowe Price. Before starting Roth Marketing Communications in 1987, he was vice president and management supervisor at Saatchi & Saatchi, responsible for several Procter and Gamble brands, and previously a vice president at Young & Rubicam advertising. During his advertising career, he led assignments ranging from Procter and Gamble's first NASCAR program to repositioning Jell-O. Earlier career experiences include the national introduction of General Mills' Nature Valley granola bars and Yoplait Yogurt while at Campbell Mithun in Minneapolis.

Mr. Roth lectures at leading business schools, including Cornell, Columbia, and

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Wharton, and provides expert industry-related commentary for television news as well as the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, AdWeek, PR News, and related professional publications. He holds a BA from the University of Miami and is a member of the College of Charleston's Department of Communications Advisory Council, the Cornell Johnson School Executive Advisory Committee, the Wharton Future of Advertising 2020 Council, and is on the board of directors of the Advertising Educational Foundation.

Dedication: *To my intrepid and faithful marketing communications team: Mindy Romero, Trevor Wade, Larry Green and Marissa Winkler.*



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