

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ASPECTS REGARDING THE AGROMARKETING STRATEGIES (A CASE STUDY AT S.C. AGRICOLA VERȘENI S.R.L., NEAMȚ COUNTY)

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Abstract

Agricultural marketing is aimed at presenting the concept and methodology in this area, issues related to the knowledge of the market and its requirements in the broad field of the circulation of agri-food products. In the context of economy globalization, specific methodological aspects are addressed, which condition the creation and functioning of the agri-food market. Agricultural production has represented an important industry for our country. It can be argued that Romania is a privileged country in this respect, as it has a rich past and various cultural traditions in the production and distribution of agricultural and food products. The foundation and deployment of all the economic activities and processes that make up agribusiness in terms of marketing optics are intended to fully ensure this, as marketing increasingly asserts itself as a science of rationalization and optimization. The used methods of research consisted in processing primary data gathered from the studied unit. Several interviews took place at the unit headquarters in Neamț county. The authors concluded, among other aspects, that A quantitative and qualitative increase of the agricultural plant and animal production is possible only by capitalizing the national productive potential and promoting organic farming systems, stimulating the increase of the performances of agricultural producers and the competitiveness of Romanian agri-food products on the domestic and international market

Key words: evolution, agromarketing strategies, financial optimization

INTRODUCTION

Agricultural production has represented and continues to represent an important industry for our country [23]. One can argue that Romania has a rich oenological past and very diverse cultural traditions in the production and distribution of agricultural and food products [6].

Romania's status as a country producing and exporting agricultural products is due to several factors. Favourable pedoclimatic conditions (continental climate moderated by certain local factors, Cambrian soils) make it possible to develop excellent crops [8].

The paper on marketing strategies of agri-food production starts from the need to explore this field, which is considered to be a

primordial part in the creation of an efficient mechanism and in the achievement of a strategy and a complex of measures [1].

The first part of the paper contains data on agriculture with a special emphasis on the situation of Iasi County by presenting the crop, food and animal production.

The objectives and methodology of agri-food marketing research are aimed at presenting the concept and methodology in this field, issues related to the knowledge of the market and its requirements in the broad field of the circulation of agri-food products [3]. In the context of the globalization of the economy, which addresses specific methodological issues that condition the creation and functioning of the agri-food market, the factors that ensure competitiveness of

production and integration into this type of market, with reference to food security, are highlighted [22], [24].

The second part of the paper presents in detail the own contributions made by S.C. Agricola Verseni S.R.L., both by characterizing the natural framework in which the research was carried out and by the results obtained.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The necessary studies for the elaboration of this paper have been carried out during the years 2020 – 2021, using as sources of information especially the primary data.

S.C. Agricola Verseni S.R.L. is an agricultural company which cultivates cereals, leguminous crops and oilseeds producing plants. The company also has a distribution department in its structure. The foundation and deployment of all the economic activities and processes that make up agribusiness in terms of marketing optics are intended to fully ensure this, as marketing increasingly asserts itself as a science of rationalization and optimization.

The agricultural sector specific to Iasi County must be in close contact with the downstream entities, providing them with the information they need to ensure the functioning of the market and the traceability of food products [11, 12]. The very development of the economy leads to the creation of more sophisticated and more efficient systems of agricultural marketing [4].

For this study care, a series of interviews were carried out at the headquarters of the agricultural unit studied. The documents of the unit regarding its evolution, the financial accounting documents regarding the evolution of the economic indicators, the evolution of the technical capacity through the investments made and other aspects were analyzed.

On the other hand, data from secondary sources, respectively the specific literature in Romania and abroad was used, including the statistical directories available at national level.

Both the data obtained in the analysis of the documents of the agricultural units as well as those of the specialized literature were

processed and interpreted in order to highlight the most relevant aspects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The company where the research was conducted mainly operates in the Commune of Miroslovești, Village of Verșeni, where it owns the largest share of agricultural land. The landforms have natural variations and limited external factors, so that temperate-continental temperature oscillations, under the influence of Atlantic and East-European anti-cyclones appear, with mean annual temperatures ranging between 9 to 10 degrees Celsius, with minimum temperatures reaching -27 degrees Celsius in wintertime and maximum temperatures slightly going above 39 degrees Celsius in the summer.

The Moldova floodplain (Lunca Moldovei) has significant reservoirs of groundwater, as well as sand, gravel and blocks, which are of economic importance to the gravel pits in the area. Analyzing the above, we can infer that the general potential of landforms is mostly favourable to agricultural and social-economic activities.

Average annual temperatures fluctuate from year to year, ranging from 9 to 10 degrees. The soil temperature varies according to the chemical characteristics, soil colour, altitude, snow layer, plant vegetation stage, and the orientation and the level of slope development, as well as the degree of soil exploitation as a result of agricultural activities etc. have a contribution here [10].

Annual mean rainfall ranges from 813 mm/sqm to 1,102 mm/sqm, with a multi-annual average of 800 mm/sqm.

Draught is encountered both in the winter season and in the summertime, the annual moisture deficit reaching 175-200 mm, which implies a compensation thereof by installing irrigation systems.

The hydrographic network is rich due to the influence of Moldova River, being represented by surface and groundwater.

The Moldova River is the main hydrographic artery. In the main riverbed of Moldova River, there is a sufficiently rich water table with a significant flow. The aquifer is maintained by

both the river and groundwater. The types of soil of the Verseni Village are divided into several categories, ranging from soils of the soft soil class, but also less developed soils (e.g. alluvial proto soils, as well as marshy soils) [21].

Agricultural marketing is an essential branch of agribusiness. The activities included in agricultural marketing refer to the achievement of certain proportions to ensure the optimal fulfilment of its functions [5]. The marketing plan includes the technical-economic and administrative actions performed on a permanent basis [29]. The forecasts of these activities lead to the setting of agricultural marketing objectives, while establishing, coordinating and undertaking the programs designed to achieve these objectives in relation to the markets. Thus, the agricultural marketing objectives capture the relation between the volume and the structure of sales with the industrial and agricultural production, the relation between the volume and the structure of stocks with the seasonality of the agricultural production included, ensuring an optimum ratio between the sales capacity and the volume of the demand.

With regard to the development of marketing forecasts, it is very important to take into account the factors that directly or indirectly influence the demand and supply of agri-food products. Thus, the marketing program/plan corrects the commercial policies of the agricultural entrepreneur and sets the optimal strategies to be achieved [26]. At the same time, the agricultural marketing plan is an information and decision-making tool, while the practical implementation of the decisions taken is a necessity for marketing control. The plan sets both the long-term objectives (taking into account the current position of enterprise development, with related directions and means of action), as well as short-term goals (product distribution and promotion) [25]. Therefore, the plan needs to be adjusted on a market-by-market basis and must follow trends and at the same time act as a means of further verifying the plan's provisions, providing the necessary information for future planning. Programming in agricultural

marketing requires first and foremost technical and practical studies that determine the possible and necessary directions of the evolution of demand for agri-food products. Generally, agribusiness comprises a variety of the most complex activities, which ensure the conduction of agricultural manifestations of producers, distributors and buyers, such as: the collection, processing, distribution and marketing of agricultural products. Given the current economic framework, these activities involve national companies with Romanian capital and international companies with foreign capital, either small or large, helping to perpetuate agricultural marketing programs and distribute agricultural products in different quantities, prices and qualities. In order for the agricultural marketing process to be sustainable in time and maintain functional standards, it is imperative that producers know the needs of consumers and thus broadly anticipate both the quantity and the quality required, which is frequently encountered in economically developed countries, where the focus has been on agricultural, industrial and other key industries.

Bernard Yon, in his paper "Le marketing agro-alimentaire", claims that there are several processing phases that the agricultural product must go through to become food, four of which are essential: physical transformation; dimensional transformation; time transformation; space transformation.

Applying high efficiency marketing to a company's business is limited by a number of factors, so that the physical distribution infrastructure of the goods is not adequately adapted to the needs for the following reasons:

- It is not possible to carry out transports with minimal time and maximum efficiency, with much lower costs, because the communication routes (road and rail) are technically and administratively deficient;
- Halls where the products are to be stored, conditioned and packaged are small and inadequately equipped and adapted to the new loading requirements given the significant gauge of the new machinery;

•The fleet of road transport means of agricultural and food products faces in time a physical wear and tear, with a minimum degree of specialization of the staff working in the field.

•Product channels often record unrealistic contracts due to weak negotiators, in relation to the position of processors and integrators on the market;

•Specialized markets are organized in a manner which is inconsistent with the agricultural realities in Romania and the legislative area addressed to these activities is often limited and insufficient by the imposed administrative regulations and rules;

•Information on agricultural marketing of products is briefly given by providers in the field and is most often insufficient or inappropriate for the region concerned [9].

As a whole, agricultural marketing applied both at macro and micro levels is analysed from several perspectives, the main ones being:

•of the farmer (the one actually carrying out the production process);

•of the processor (the one bringing product to a stage compliant with the demanding requirements of the consumer market);

•of the intermediary (the one ensuring connection between the chain links for the product to reach the final consumer);

•of the consumer (the one freely disposing of the product)

In view of the above, we can assume that the functions of agricultural marketing within the society can be classified into:

a) Exchange functions (buy-sell)

b) Physical functions (storage, transport, processing)

c)Facilitating functions (standardization, financing, risk taking and bearing, marketing studies)

The main objectives of the agri-food marketing agencies that the company seeks on a permanent basis are:

•Permanent organization of both the manager and the agronomist engineer;

•Establishing the actual prices of the controlled products in agreement with the company's management body;

•Creating a fair competitive framework, helping us to adjust to market requirements;

•Marketing activity has been regulated through training programs;

•The ability of intermediaries to monopolise the sale of products and manipulate the profits of agricultural producers and processors has been reduced, so we have made the decision to purchase two trucks;

•Creating the conditions for increasing the degree of concentration of agricultural production;

•Supervising compliance with the marketing practices and procedures we have established;

•Providing services such as: risk management, providing marketing information, conducting market studies, etc.;

•Conducting purchase, conditioning, storage and resale of surplus production for controlled products, etc.

•Making more favourable crediting arrangements for agricultural production and other activities in the agricultural marketing system;

The company managed to start making business by cultivating straw cereals, corn, sunflower and rapeseed from a few hectares of arable land at its establishment in 2014, significantly increasing cultivated areas (by lease, concession, and purchase), in 2014-2015: 118 ha, in 2015-2016: 288 ha.

The company also seeks to apply strategies for pricing, distribution and promotion specific to agri-food products and actions directed to the integration of marketing policies and strategies into the company's mission and overall objectives. Following these objectives, through a careful monitoring of environmental quality, we use minimal invasive methods to preserve a competitive soil, quality fertilizers, but also composts, so as not to affect soil quality over time, and low-pollutant modern machines, but also agricultural aggregates that have the role of maintaining and improving the soil structure.

The agribusiness developed by the company duly combines product policy and distribution policy to an appropriate extent for the purposes set, facilitation of the works done and agricultural market requirements.

Once the company determined the markets it wanted to enter, it carefully studied the access conditions, and had to define its “product strategy” that it will adopt and adapt according to the new markets: what products and quantity of products will it export and under what seal, what changes will it bring to its existing products. Achieving a product suitable for foreign markets requires involving all members of the undertaking, respecting the safety, storage quality and transport criteria [14].

In general, international product policy refers to all the decisions of a classical product policy by adding some improvements that actually seem to be restrictions related to the approach of foreign markets. These restrictions can be categorized into two categories:

(1) Domestic restrictions:

- Financial: are there sufficient resources to meet the marketing budgets necessary to develop the competitive position in foreign markets?

- Production: is the production capacity necessary to increase production volume and diversify the range of products? Are manufactured products complying with international standards? Does the undertaking have the ability to transfer the necessary equipment? etc.

- Logistics, relating to logistic flow multiplication, inventory and shipment management.

(2) International restrictions:

- Relating to the socio-cultural, political and economic particularities of each country;

- Relating to the evolution of the manufacturing technologies of the products;

- Relating to the nature of products: adaptation or standardization of products traded on foreign markets?

- Relating to the ability of an enterprise to define the nature and extent of its product range with regard to its competitors on each market.

There are many reasons that urge us to get out of the domestic market and sell across borders. Saturation

The fact that the domestic market is saturated with a product is the most common reason to

focus our marketing efforts abroad. Although saturation at an absolute level is rare, it is sometimes easier to penetrate foreign markets than a new internal market, especially if it is a country like ours, with an increasingly efficient agriculture and very well developed economically speaking.

Exchange rate

The value of national currencies may vary quite a lot, often with damaging effects on the company’s estimated profit, as the company makes a profit forecast based on preliminary contracts concluded with foreign companies and finds with a heavy heart that it was affected by the exchange rate. The effect is even worse since the company bought foreign material for production in 2015, such as chemical fertilizers for agricultural crops.

Expensive products are the most affected, although consumer goods can sometimes be affected as well. Unless customs authorities intervene, our products normally destined for the domestic market are also exported abroad. Given that domestic consumption stays still, prices will rise internally due to the drop in supply. S.C. Agricola Verseni S.R.L. Company achieves positive effects on both markets, both domestic and international. Goods such as beef meat and coffee are often subject to sudden increases in demand abroad, but our grain and oil oilseed plants are also highly demand on the market.

Brand value and selection

Some companies have created an international brand name that is recognized virtually anywhere in the world. Such relatively famous names are often part of the market language before even their products come out of the halls, cross the borders and reach the end consumers. However, most companies do not have such a reputation behind them before entering a new market and must practically start from scratch, as was the case with S.C. Agricola Verseni S.R.L. company, which is a small, new agricultural holding with a fairly limited market opening. This situation has both negative and positive aspects.

If we refer to the positive side, the target market had no preconceived idea about what the company stands for. For example, not only do large holdings bear the burden of the

quality level of their products, but they are often seen as representatives and promoters of dominating foreign cultures, which reviles the image of those companies. It is not unusual for a project to stumble upon local protests, even if a known company is only involved as a small investor or supplier for that project.

Besides the question of notoriety, there is also the question of wealth. New markets suppose that rich corporations will throw money away (legally and illegally), and local partners may be indignant to find the tight financial control that is an intrinsic part of their business both locally, nationally and internationally. The price strategy is part of the market-based agricultural marketing strategy, being part of the company's long-term strategy and then detailed through short-term strategies that are reflected in pricing tactics.

A. Pricing strategies

To discover and understand pricing strategies which the undertaking under review uses, we will make a classification based on some criteria, which, at management level, we consider to be essential.

1. Pricing strategies correlated with costs are made based on:

- a. Average unit cost, b. Marginal cost, c. Profitability threshold, d. Return on investment.

These strategies require the calculation of production costs to which a profit is added, thus identifying the minimum price, i.e. the lowest acceptable level, which the enterprise requires, in order to meet the profit objective.

2. Pricing strategies correlated with demand are based on the knowledge not only of production costs, but also of the following aspects: a. Elasticity of demand in relation to price; b. Consumer behaviour; c. Psychological (accessibility) price; d. Price correlated with the life cycle of the product.

These strategies are often used when the price displayed is the key factor in the customer's decision. For this purpose, the price ceiling is identified, which is the maximum level the buyer can offer and which normally depends on the elasticity of demand.

3. Pricing strategies correlated with competition involve making prices depending on competitors' prices, taking into account a

number of factors such as loyalty, quality, image, etc. This category of strategies includes: a. High pricing strategy, b. Penetration pricing strategy.

4. The combined strategy, which takes into account the three previous strategies, adapting to market conditions.

B. The position of the product requires the use of: (Ph., Kotler, op. cit., p. 773-791) [16]

1. Pricing strategies for new products, that address two situations:

2. Pricing strategies for a set of products, that aim to maximize profits not for a product but for a set of products

3. Price adjustment strategies, aimed at reflecting the differences between consumers and changing market situations.

The most common ones are: a. Granting bonus rebates; b. Differentiated pricing strategy; c. Psychological pricing strategy; d. Promotional pricing strategy; e. value-oriented pricing strategy; f. Pricing strategy based on geographic criteria; g. International pricing strategy.

C. The length of use of the strategy has led to delimiting:

I. Long-term strategies, materialized in: 1. Stratification pricing strategy; 2. Penetration pricing strategy; 3. Peak pricing strategy; 4. Product line pricing strategy, 5. Discriminatory pricing strategy; 6. Final pricing strategy, 7. Odd pricing strategy.

II. Short-term strategies, materialized in tactics focused on:

1. Receipts, 2. Volume 3. Competition, 4. Consideration-oriented tactics

4. Choosing the right strategy is the task of the manager responsible for determining and tracking the use of the price as a tool to achieve the fundamental goal of obtaining the highest profit. The company's manager, Bogza Oana-Elena, together with the agronomist engineer Isachi Andrei studied the market and the statistics provided by suppliers and subsequently used a range of methods available to establish fair prices that take into account the needs of the company, the customer and external factors, including the competition and the absolutely natural phenomena that influence the evolution of crops. The most valued methods, which are

commonly implemented, are: cost of production plus the mark-up, target price, minimum price, critical point, local market penetration, psychological method, price line method, competition, etc.

Price policies were not completed with price fixing based on the adopted strategy, because, by itself, the price is dynamic and fluid, and the business environment, generally the agricultural market, is constantly changing. As a result, for the price, as an element of the agricultural marketing mix, to be able to meet its established objectives, it has been constantly changed to match the other components of the marketing mix [7]. On the market, during this period, the partners finally reached a mutual acceptance, mainly using, especially on the organizational market, types of prices such as administered, auctioned, negotiated, transfer. For these reasons, S.C. Agricola Verseni S.R.L. Company initially adopted the market penetration strategy in 2014 and at the end of 2016 it managed to adjust its pricing strategies depending on competition and demand. In conclusion, pricing tactics that permanently involved the implementation of specific marketing strategies have been constantly altered so as not to lose too much on the financial side, but also in terms of the interest and the trust of clients, one the objectives were achieved and new ones were established.

The distribution strategy is an important basis for a company's agricultural marketing plan. Distribution policies and strategies were aimed explicitly at ensuring customers' loyalty [2].

The tools for implementing the distribution strategies used relate to the following:

- Distribution channels
- Distribution network
- Assortment of goods
- Storage
- Transport
- Inventory management etc.

Some of the manufacturer's targets for the products offered for sale have been:

- They must reach the consumer in a fresh state and in short times
- Delivery time limits and quality assurance were set
- In order to prevent customers' availability requirements, the most efficient fractioning and assortment must be ensured.

However, there are some strategic alternatives used permanently for distribution policy:

- Distribution through own means;
- Distribution through own means and intermediaries;
- Distribution through intermediaries.

For each of the above-mentioned variants, S.C. Agricola Verseni S.R.L. calculates the price obtained by the producer, the expenses incurred by the latter and the expected sales (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution variants and sales trends

Variants of distribution	The price obtained by the producer	The expenses incurred by the producer		Expected sales
		With distribution	With promotion	
Own appliance	Increases	Increases	Decreases	Increases
Own appliance and intermediaries	Decreases	Decreases	Increases	Decreases
Intermediaries	Decreases	Decreases	Increases	Decreases

Source: own research, [28].

Taking into account the price variation according to the mode of distribution of agricultural products, S.C. Agricola Verseni S.R.L. Company decided to increase its profits by acquiring two trucks, both financially and in terms of leading times [28]. The Company made the purchase because with own means of transport you no longer

have to look for distributors and wait for their availability. Now the company has its own distribution channel, thus making an economic plus and ensuring the timely delivery of its products, without compromising on quality.

The company wants its products to come as close as possible to potential customers, and

for this reason, it implemented a series of tactics to streamline the promotion of the products in its portfolio. It chose several methods, taking into account various ideas learned on the market, such as: contrary to common beliefs, a high-quality product does not sell itself.

Although quality should speak for the product and not the advertisement, there is still the need to promote products in different forms and in different environments, otherwise the customer does not get to know and be interested in that product.

An essential part of a promoting/marketing strategy is communicating the utility and benefits of a product. There are several methods and channels for promoting agricultural products and services by choosing own combination, depending on the target segments, the specificity of the offered products/activity.

Advertisements: mass media, street posters and among local officials, advertisements placed on the main roads, near Hanul Ancuței, a renowned inn, where the undertaking has land leased.

The invasive and aggressive method, especially in its traditional forms, classic advertising tends to lose ground in favour of new means of promotion. This loss is caused even by the enormous amount far beyond what we can capture - advertising information. TV commercial also has the disadvantage of high costs. Advertisements in TV, printed magazines/newspapers are especially suited to agricultural companies

because they reach the target audience, landowners and those interested in agricultural products that are quite anchored in this type of traditionalist advertising that S.C. Agricola Verseni S.R.L. used it in agricultural campaigns.

Internet advertising has more advantages in the case of a marketing strategy, but it has been used only sequentially, in the short run, as the company has no official website, just by using small ads on specialised sites. We intend to have a website made, both in Romanian and English, to make our products known and to make it easier to be noticed because this promotion method suggests:

- The possibility of optimal targeting, meaning a high impact on the number of visitors;
- Low, almost insignificant cost;
- It may be easier to provide interested people with detailed, specialist information, which is why it is well suited for legal customers;
- Practically unlimited flexibility in terms of approach.

This type of promotion is appropriate for higher value agricultural products and services intended for all customers, in general, to those who are open to new, but especially to other large companies operating as suppliers or potential partners and buyers [20].

For advertising purposes, S.C. Agricola Verseni S.R.L., as a young undertaking, established an advertising budget of 2,000 lei, broken down as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The structure of the promotional budget allocated by S.C. Agricola Verseni S.R.L. in 2016

The means of mass communication	Duration / size	Audience (nr. of people)	Frequency	Monthly cost (lei)
TV	10 s	1,750	8 times / week	900
Newspapers	¼ page	350	1 time / 2 weeks	350
Internet	¼ web page	3,250	At each access	750
Total		5,350		2,000

Source: own research, [28].

Technical factors play an important role in increasing production by means of mechanization, chemistry, irrigation, etc., while the influence of the socio-economic

factors is manifested through the capacity and level of training of the labour force and the entire economic context in which this branch of economy is developing. Like any economic

activity, the agricultural activity has the purpose of satisfying the human needs and the general progress of the country [27].

The development of agriculture is influenced in a large percentage by natural, technical and socio-economic factors.

In order to maintain and perpetuate the soil quality used for crops, we have adopted the following ecological and technical standards regarding the quality of work. The procedures used refer to the following:

- The company may not cultivate twice in a row sunflower or sugar beet on the same soil;
- The burning of stubble fields, land of any kind for cleaning and fertilization purposes was done only when absolutely necessary and with approval from the competent authorities in the territory where such cleaning and care activities took place;
- Earth moving or minimal soil coverage to prevent erosion;
- Avoiding damage to habitats by observing the minimum densities of livestock and appropriate regimes;
- Maintaining landscapes;
- Protecting and maintaining stubble fields;
- Avoiding the growing of undesirable vegetation on agricultural land, for which we used various chemical fertilizers and minimally invasive agricultural practices.

CONCLUSIONS

As far as the crop production in Iasi County is concerned, the highest share belongs to field crops. The fact is explicable because arable land is 67.9%, vineyards are 3.8% and fruit trees 2.5% of the agricultural area.

In terms of economic activity in the agricultural field, the plant production has a relatively high importance in relation to the regional and national production. Iasi County's fauna is closely related to the specifics of the plant cover, and there are species living in the deciduous forests, forest steppe, floodplains, river and lake waters [15]. A quantitative and qualitative increase of the agricultural plant and animal production is possible only by capitalizing the national productive potential and promoting organic farming systems, stimulating the increase of

the performances of agricultural producers and the competitiveness of Romanian agri-food products on the domestic and international market [13].

The agricultural sector in Romania, including the one specific to Iasi County, must be in close contact with the downstream entities, providing them with the information they need to ensure the functioning of the market and the traceability of food products.

Food quality and safety must be obtained and monitored through Production Quality Management Systems and by methods that ensure systematic treatment of potential hazards and provide information to identify the undertaking, production team, date of manufacture, batch, quantity, type and quality of the products [16, 19].

In order to understand market phenomena, we need to know the correlations and mutual influences of factors that condition a phenomenon. This is possible only by using abstractions, first of all referring to the study of the influences of a single adopted measure, and considering the other factors as being constant, after which other previously ignored factors are successively introduced, which makes it possible to finally know the forces of economic life often interfering with supply and demand tendencies on the market [17].

Marketing studies and research are considered investigations based on analyses and forecasts meant to determine the potential market and its evolution, the characteristics of the existing market and the sales mechanism, etc., for which combinations of different methods and processes are used, mainly statistical and mathematical ones [18].

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