

An Empirical Study on Channel (Dealer) Satisfaction – A Key to Healthy Business Relationship (With special Reference to Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited, in Tamilnadu, India)

Radhakrishnan Ramarathnam,

*Research Scholar, Department of Commerce and Business Administration, Acharya Nagarjuna University
&*

Prof R Siva Rama Prasad,

*(Head, Dept. of Commerce and Business Administration, Head Dept. of International Business Studies & Dean
Faculty of Commerce & Management studies*

Abstract:

Effective Dealer management (known popularly as Channel partner management in marketing) is key to successful Retailing of any product. Marketing Organizations consistently focus in managing their channels through various measures to keep the channel partners motivated. But how do the Channel Partners perceive the various initiatives of the company in motivating the dealers? How satisfied are the dealers with their Principal? The objective of this paper is to study the dealer perceptions about the various activities of the company in the Petro Retailing Business of HPCL. To meet the objective primary data was collected in Tamil Nadu at HPCL retail outlets to study among 114 dealers from 23 districts to examine the experiences of the dealers with respect to their interactions with the Principal Organization relating to fuel and non-fuel business at the Retail Outlets. The study was concluded that the Channel partners in the Petro Retail segment of the organization demonstrated high degree of satisfaction.

Key Words: *Dear network, Retailing, HPCL, Satisfaction.*

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I. Introduction:

Marketing Organizations largely depend on their Retail Channel Network for selling small quantities of their products to the end consumers. These Channel Partners known as dealers, in due course of their Retailing business, have closer interactions with the organization and the customers and maximize revenues and profits for themselves as well as the organizations who are their Principals. From time to time, depending on the marketing dynamics, in order stay ahead of competition, marketing organizations introduce several marketing initiatives and have all such strategic initiatives driven through the Channel Network. However, the dealer community facing the frontline customers in the primary business development endeavour continuously interacts with the company and facilitates success of such strategic activities. In Petro Retailing Retail Sector since the market opened up from early 2000, to stay ahead of competition, Oil marketing companies in India have undertaken several initiatives in the market and these initiatives were driven through the dealer network. The success depended on acceptability, alignment and commitment towards the initiatives by the dealer network.

The researcher, working on the impact of marketing initiatives in the Petro-Retailing Sector undertook a field research through a structured questionnaire administered to 114 dealers of Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL), a leading Public Sector Oil Company in India in 23 districts of Tamil Nadu to understand the satisfaction levels of the dealers in respect of the initiatives driven by the company through them.

Channel Management in Petroleum Retailing Business:

In their research paper “Private Players Promise Retail Makeover in India, India Brand Equity Foundation observed that “Earlier petrol stations were merely used for filling fuel; now they are gradually getting converted into multi facility joints. Companies have begun improve appearance standards and have also begun to set up retail petrol stations abutting malls with huge parking spaces in the outskirts and satellite towns of major cities”. This observation is important from the perspective of building a strong dealer-company relationship as any new initiative at an outlet needs to have a dealer’s “buy in” for its successful rollout.

From the Report of the Working Group on Petroleum & Natural Gas Sector for the XI Plan (2007-2012) it was observed that “With competition having set in, there is a lot of focus on the customer needs. Companies have started offering better forecourt services, non-fuel products at ROs, usage of credit/debit/fleet cards with attractive loyalty programmes to attract and retain customers and volumes. Innovative methods to improve customer relationship are being introduced. With more and more ROs being commissioned and with lowering of per pump throughput, companies may scout for opportunities in non-fuel retailing to enhance dealers and company’s income levels”.

Dealer Satisfaction Index:(DSI)

One of the key factors of a good Dealer-firm relationship is the level of satisfaction of the dealer to the various services and facilities of the organization provided to him. Having looked at the facilities available at the various retail outlets, the dealers were asked to respond on a 10 point scale (10 best and 1 worst) their expectation of what they considered important to their business. The average score per dealer computed as a ratio of the sum of the scores to the number of responses is defined as the expectation index against the particular parameter. The dealers ranked the facilities and services on a 10 point scale as below for the actual availability of various facilities and services at the outlets.

Similarly the average score on experience per dealer was computed as a ratio of the sum of the scores to the total responses on the actual experience of the dealers against the above attributes is defined as experience index against the particular parameter.

The dealer satisfaction index for the various attributes was computed as below:

$DSI = \text{Average score on experience} / \text{Average score on expectation}$

The decision rules defined for DSI are defined as under:

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$DSI > 1.0$ the dealers are delighted

$DSI \geq 0.85$ but < 1.0 the dealers are highly satisfied

$DSI \geq 0.70$ but < 0.85 the dealers are satisfied

$DSI < 0.70$ the dealers are not satisfied

Dealer Company Interaction Satisfaction Index:

Dealer-Firm relationship is characterized through another key dimension, which is the dealers experience with the company during their interactions with various departments and functions. If a dealer has to strengthen the company’s brand image in the market place and deliver the company’s promises to the end customer, it is essential for him to get the desired support from the employees in various departments of the company. The company’s systems and procedures, attitude of the employees in sales, marketing, operations, engineering and finance departments play a major role in providing an roller-coaster experience to the dealer which will help him to focus on the business. The robust response mechanism put in place by the company provides comfort to the dealers that they can focus their attention on the customers rather than spending their time on internal issues with the company. How do the dealers respond to this experience?

On each of the dealer-company interaction touch points the dealers were asked to respond on a 10 point scale their degree of response. Dealer satisfaction levels were determined as a ratio of total scores to the number of responses and defined as Dealer-Company Interaction Satisfaction Index (DCISI).

The decision rules defined are as under:

$DCISI = 1$ Dealers are Delighted

$DCISI \geq 0.85$ but < 1.0 Dealers are highly satisfied

$DCISI \geq 0.70$ but < 0.85 Dealers are satisfied

$DCISI < 0.70$ Dealers are not satisfied

II. Review of Literature:

The review of literature has been presented in order to assess the importance of channel (dealer) satisfaction business like petroleum retail outlets, as there are very few studies conducted so far in this areas, however, a few important studies have been presented here

- **Dr Ajantha Sen** in his research paper “Petroleum retail outlets as the mother of all POP’s – the case study of BPCL” has quoted that “according to Marcello Minale, arguably the best known face for retail visual identity (RVI) programs for major oil companies across the world, “The first petrol station was an extension of a grocery store, now it is the grocery store itself”. The point emphasises how a Petrol station has transformed itself over the years. To make any initiative successful, the companies need to have continuous communication

with their existing dealers/franchisee to motivate them towards benefits of having other services at the outlets. At the same time, it is also important to maintain a balance between selling fuel and offering other services.

- **P Kumar and A Sahay** In their research article “Retailing at Petrol pumps: from Commodity Dispensing to Customer service” “The Indian petrol and diesel retail market is undergoing metamorphosis. Intense competition has set in due to the reforms carried out in persuasion to the policy of liberalisation which has resulted in the entry of private players in petroleum sector. The existing players have suddenly started giving importance to customer’s needs and wants. Customer Relationship has, thus, emerged as a virtue to them. In a Retail market, dealer plays a significant role in strengthening relationship with customers since he is the face of an organisation to the customer.

- **Goabaone Mokabjri** in his paper Customer Loyalty towards Brands with Botswana’s Petroleum Industry states that Relationship equity relates is purely to how a firm makes customers feel. A firm could motivate customers to build a community, which rest upon a structured set of relationships among “fans” of a brand. They should also ensure that members of loyalty programs who are engaged in the brand’s community, are more loyal than those who are not offered this relationship benefit.

- **Donald V Fites (1996)** in his Harvard Business Review article on Supply Chain Management – Make your dealers your partners (HBR Mar-Apr 1996), observes as below:

- Local dealers who are long-established members of their communities can get closer to customers than a global company can on its own; but to tap the full potential of such dealers, a company must forge extremely close ties with them and integrate them into its critical business systems. When treated in this way, dealers can serve as sources of market information and intelligence, as proxies for customers, as consultants, and as problem solvers. Indeed, our dealers play a vital role in almost every aspect of our business, including product design and delivery, service and field support, and the management of replacement-part inventories.

- Dealers can be much more than a channel to customers. They can play an important role in providing customers with a wide range of services before and after the sale. Those services include advice on the selection and application of a product, financing, insurance, operator training, maintenance and repair, and help in deciding when it makes economic sense to replace a machine.

- Creating an outstanding distribution organization requires significant investments by both the company and its independent dealers. Although those investments take the usual forms of money and capital assets, they also include softer assets such as training and developing a common understanding of what it takes to provide superior customer service.

- The quality of the relationship between a company and its dealers is much more important than the contractual agreements or the techniques and tactics that make the relationship work on the surface. What matters is mutual trust, and that is fostered by observing a few simple rules: Share gain as well as pain; strive for continuity in relationships and consistency in policies; and communicate constantly. For a company that relies on independent dealers to present one face to its customers around the world, it must have uniform practices and performance standards for dealers and treat them all with equal consideration while recognizing that they are independent and unique in many ways.

- When a company is deciding which new products to add to its line, it should consider two key factors: First, which new product contenders best fit its distribution system, and second, whether the distribution system will add value to the product in the eyes of the end user.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) to study the perceptions of dealers towards HPCL activities;
- 2) to study the dealer satisfaction about petrol retailing business of HPCL company
- 3) to offer the pragmatic suggestions based on the findings of the study

III. Methodology:

This study is based on the primary data, going by the studies which indicate the need of having robust initiatives towards enhancement of customer loyalty, a study based on a survey through a structured questionnaire was conducted in the State of Tamil Nadu by the researcher to understand the perceptions of the dealers in respect of their relationship with the organization Non Fuel Business and its associated success. The size of the sample was 114 dealers (representing around 10% of the population of the dealers then) from 23 districts of the state of Tamil Nadu were administered a structured questionnaire at the outlets of HPCL. The respondents were classified under City, Semi urban, highway and rural markets.

Limitations of the study:

1. The study is restricted predominantly to the Geographical market of Tamil Nadu and HPCL outlets. Hence the results may be applicable to markets similar in characteristics to these markets only
2. The study has been conducted with the sample size of 114.
3. This is a partial study and has more scope for further research

IV. Data Analysis:

Table1. Type of Category of Dealership

S.No	Category of Dealership	No. of Respondents	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
1	Sole Proprietorship	88	77.2	77.2
2	Partnership	18	15.8	93.0
3	Others	8	7	100
	Total	114	100	100

Source: Primary Data

The above table represents type of category of dealership, it is evident from the data out of total sample respondents as many 88 accounting for 77.2 per cent of respondents who are having category of dealership was sole proprietorship, followed by 18 accounting for 15.8 per cent respondents possess partnership dealership, whereas a meagre 7 per cent of respondents comes under others category. It can be concluded that majority of sample respondents are sole proprietorship when compared to other type of dealership in study area.

Table 2 Geographical location wise of sample respondents

S.No	Geographical location of dealership	No. of Respondents	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
1	City	12	10.5	10.5
2	Semi Urban	33	28.9	39.4
3	Highway	38	33.4	72.8
	Rural	31	27.2	100
	Total	114	100	100

Source: Primary Data

The above table depicts about the geographical location of the sample respondents. It is found from the data, of the sample respondents 33.4 per cent of the respondents their dealership was located in highways, followed by 28.9 per cent of sample respondents stated that their dealership was located in semi urban place, further followed by 27.2 per cent their location was rural, whereas a meagre 10.5 per cent of respondents their dealership was in city, it can be concluded from the analysis that respondents with highway geographical location as high as compared to other responses of the respondents

Table 3: No of years of business outlet

No. of years old Outlet	City	Semi Urban	Highway	Rural	Total
<10 Yrs.	3	8	23	17	51 (44.8)
(10-20) Yrs.	2	10	9	11	32 (28)
(20-30) Yrs.	1	4	4	1	10 (8.8)
>30 Yrs.	6	11	2	2	21 (18.4)
Total	12	33	38	31	114 (100)

Source: Primary Data

The above tables indicate the no of years of business outlet, it is evident from the data that the dealers are well established in their business over a period of time and hence have a reasonably good knowledge about the market requirements. Over 70% of the outlets are upto twenty years in existence. Interestingly, significant number of outlets are in existence of less than 10 years indicating the growth phase of the channel.

Table 4: Age of active dealers in various markets

Active Dealer Age	City	Semi Urban	Highway	Rural	Total
25-35 Yrs	3	3	7	7	20
35-50 Yrs.	5	17	24	17	63
>50 Yrs.	4	13	7	7	31
Total	12	33	38	31	114

Source: Primary Data

The above table depicts about the age of the dealer, it is gratifying to observe the above data, that significant proportion of dealers are up to 50 years of age. This again reflects that the active dealers are relatively young and well experienced to meet the business challenges, as required by the trade.

Table 5: Proportion of Dealers who have stated about the availability of facilities at their Retail outlets

Have Facility ? (Yes/No)	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total	H0: Have facility <=	Z calculated	Z Table @5% los		
Timely Supply of Product (Petrol/HSD)	107	7	114	0.94	0.06	1	0.85	2.649	1.645	Reject H0	More than 85% receive timely supplies
Flexible Terms of Payment	105	9	114	0.92	0.08	1	0.85	2.125	1.645	Reject H0	More than 85% are provided flexible
Provision of Adequate number of dispensing	114	0	114	1.00	0.00	1	0.9	3.559	1.645	Reject H0	More than 90% are provided adequated
Provision of smooth driveway	106	8	114	0.93	0.07	1	0.85	2.387	1.645	Reject H0	More than 85% are having smooth
Provision of Canopy	91	23	114	0.80	0.20	1	0.7	2.289	1.645	Reject H0	More than 70% have canopies in outlets
Provision of Convenience stores	30	84	114	0.26	0.74	1	0.25	0.324	1.645	Accept H0	Less than 25% of outlets have convenience
Provision of ATM	38	76	114	0.33	0.67	1	0.3	0.777	1.645	Accept H0	Less than 30% have ATMs in outlets
Provision of Restaurant/CCD/Eatery	8	106	114	0.07	0.93	1	0.05	0.988	1.645	Reject H0	Less than 5% have an eatery in outlets
Loyalty Card	95	19	114	0.83	0.17	1	0.75	2.055	1.645	Reject H0	More than 75% have a loyalty card program at
Maintenance of Services Provided by	98	16	114	0.86	0.14	1	0.75	2.704	1.645	Reject H0	More than 75% have maintenance services
Automation of outlet	64	50	114	0.56	0.44	1	0.45	2.391	1.645	Reject H0	More than 45% automation at outlets

Statistically, it is evident that most of the core facilities from the organization has been ensured to the dealers.

Table 6 Dealer perceptions of what the dealers are to do with respect to the critical areas of business identified and what is expected from the Principal Organization

COMPANY	Activity	City	Semi Urban	Highway	Rural	All	Category
	Ensuring timely supplies are made	20.3	21.3	24.0	23.4	22.7	Vital
Ensure provision of facilities (driveway/canopy/salesroom/tankage/ dispensing units) as per mutual discussions.	17.2	22.5	18.5	18.3	19.4		
COMPANY	Ensure training programs to dealers as per plans on various programs	15.8	16.2	14.9	17.8	16.2	Essential
	Ensure training programs to dealersmen as per plans	16.8	15.6	15.8	14.8	15.6	
COMPANY	Ensure prompt release of credit notes as applicable	16.5	12.8	14.3	14.6	14.2	Desirable
	Ensure payment terms as per mutual discussions	14.8	11.5	12.5	11.1	12.0	
DEALER	Activity	City	Semi Urban	Highway	Rural	All	Category
	Ensure timely payments in line with indents	14.6	17.3	17.5	18.4	17.4	Vital
DEALER	Ensure meeting of company’s targets in relation to sales volumes, customer enrolments through loyalty programs	15.8	16.7	15.1	16.1	15.9	
	Ensure prompt redressal and resolution of customer complaints	14.8	13.5	14.3	14.8	14.3	
DEALER	Ensure adherence to forecourt services operating practices	14.1	14.9	13.5	13.6	14.0	
DEALER	Ensure attendance at training programs and dealer meets	13.8	12.8	13.9	13.5	13.4	
DEALER	Ensure adherence to all guidelines of the company	14.8	13.6	12.7	12.6	13.2	Desirable
DEALER	Ensure nomination of staff for dealersmen training program	12.3	11.2	12.9	12.4	12.2	

Dealers expect company to ensure timely supplies and provision of facilities at the outlets as vital, whereas ensuring timely payments and meeting company’s sales objectives are seen as vital for them to deliver.

Table 7 Dealer expectation index for the various attributes classified under vital, essential and desirable categories based on their overall average scores on expectations

Category	Attributes	City	Semi Urban	Highway	Rural	All
VITAL	Free air service	9.6	9.3	9.2	9.2	9.3
	Timely Supply of Product (Petrol/HSD incl variants)	9.1	9.1	9.1	9.1	9.1
	Toilet	9.1	8.9	9.0	8.8	8.9
	Flexible Terms of Payment	9.2	8.2	8.4	8.1	8.4
	Maintenance of Services Provided by company	8.9	8.6	8.2	7.8	8.3
	Provision of smooth driveway	9.1	8.1	8.2	8.1	8.2
	Provision of Canopy	10.8	8.0	7.9	7.6	8.2
ESSENTIAL	Provision of Adequate number of dispensing units	8.6	9.1	7.7	7.3	8.1
	Automation of outlet	6.9	8.2	7.9	8.1	7.9
	Loyalty Card	9.0	7.9	7.7	7.2	7.8
DESIRABLE	Provision of ATM	6.7	5.8	5.1	5.2	5.5

Provision of Convenience stores	5.2	5.5	5.9	5.0	5.4
Provision of Restaurant/CCD/Eatery	2.9	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.9

Table 8 below provides the dealer’s actual experience of the dealers against the above attributes:

ATTRIBUTES (COMPANY'S ACTUAL SERVICES)	City	Semi Urban	Highway	Rural	All
Free air services	9.7	8.8	9.2	9.3	9.2
Timely Supply of Product	9.3	9.2	9.2	8.8	9.1
Clean Toilet facility	9.8	8.8	9.1	8.6	8.9
Terms of Payment	9.5	8.7	8.0	8.4	8.5
Adequate number of dispensing units	7.5	9.1	8.6	7.8	8.4
Maintenance of Services Provided by company	9.4	8.2	8.3	7.5	8.2
Loyalty Card	9.3	8.1	8.3	7.5	8.1
smooth driveway	9.4	7.8	8.2	7.7	8.1
Canopy	8.8	8.0	7.8	7.0	7.8
Campaigns and Promotions	8.6	7.6	7.3	7.4	7.6
Outlet Automation	7.7	7.8	7.4	7.0	7.4
ATM	5.4	5.8	4.1	4.5	4.8
Convenience stores	3.2	4.9	5.1	4.9	4.8
Restaurant/CCD/Eatery	3.8	4.8	4.7	5.0	4.7

Table 9 Based on the above two tables, the dealer satisfaction index (DSI) for the various attributes.

Category	Attributes	DSI(EXPERIENCE/EXPECTATION) MKT. WISE				
		City	Semi Urban	Highway	Rural	All
V	Free air service	1.01	0.94	1.01	1.00	0.99
V	Timely Supply of Product (Petrol/HSD incl variants)	1.02	1.02	1.01	0.97	1.00
V	Toilet	1.07	0.99	1.01	0.98	1.00
V	Flexible Terms of Payment	1.04	1.06	0.95	1.03	1.01
V	Maintenance of Services Provided by company	1.06	0.95	1.02	0.96	0.99
V	Provision of smooth driveway	1.04	0.96	1.00	0.95	0.98
V	Provision of Canopy	0.82	1.00	0.99	0.92	0.95
E	Provision of Adequate number of dispensing units	0.87	1.00	1.12	1.07	1.04
E	Automation of outlet	1.11	0.96	0.94	0.86	0.94
E	Loyalty Card	1.03	1.03	1.07	1.04	1.05
D	Provision of ATM	0.81	1.00	0.80	0.88	0.88

D	Provision of Convenience stores	0.61	0.89	0.87	0.98	0.88
D	Provision of Restaurant/CCD/Eatery	1.29	1.20	1.19	1.26	1.22

Table 10 Dealer Satisfaction Index across markets and overall market:

Category	Attributes	VRDSI (CATEGORY WISE)					VRDSI OVER ALL
		City	Semi Urban	Highway	Rural	All	
V	Free air service	1.01	0.99	1.00	0.97	0.99	1.004
V	Timely Supply of Product (Petrol/HSD incl variants)						
V	Toilet						
V	Flexible Terms of Payment						
V	Maintenance of Services Provided by company						
V	Provision of smooth driveway						
V	Provision of Canopy						
E	Provision of Adequate number of dispensing units	1.00	1.00	1.04	0.99	1.01	
E	Automation of outlet						
E	Loyalty Card						
D	Provision of ATM	0.90	1.03	0.95	1.04	0.99	
D	Provision of Convenience stores						
D	Provision of Restaurant/CCD/Eatery						

Dealer satisfaction Index(DSI) is slightly below 1 in Vital and Desirable category Services on over all basis. However in Essential Category Services it is >1. Market wise DSI is below 1 in Vital Category Services in Semi Urban and Rural markets, in Essential Categories in Rural Markets and in Desirable Categories in Highway markets. Assigning weightage of 1 to Vital , 0.67 to Essential and 0.33 to Desirable Category VRDSI and calculating the weighted average DSI overall has come to 1.004 which is greater than 1 and indicating that Dealers are on an Overall basis in a delight category with Company's services vis a vis their expectations.

Table 11 Experience of the dealers in a 10 point scale their experiences with the company.

Interactions with the Company	City	Semi Urban	Highway	Rural	All	Satisfaction Level
Visit by sales officers	9.6	9.5	9.4	9.1	9.3	Highly Satisfied
Dealer meetings in Regional office	8.7	8.9	8.7	7.8	8.5	Satisfied
Behaviour of various employees in office	9.3	8.7	8.4	7.8	8.4	
Dealer meetings in sales area	9.4	8.4	8.3	8.0	8.4	
Visit by officials higher than sales officers	9.3	8.5	8.2	7.3	8.2	
Support from Dispensing units maintenance services department	9.2	8.2	7.7	8.0	8.1	
Training program to dealermen	9.1	8.4	7.4	7.7	7.9	Moderately Satisfied
Behaviour of employees at supply locations	9.3	8.2	7.6	7.4	7.9	
Response to your statement of accounts related issues	8.9	8.2	7.6	6.8	7.7	

Timely adjustment/Receipt of receivables and credit notes, if, any from company	9.4	7.9	7.0	7.5	7.7	
Training program to dealers	8.8	8.3	7.1	6.8	7.6	
Support from retail engineering maintenance service team	8.9	8.4	7.2	6.5	7.5	
Campaigns and promotions	9.0	8.4	6.4	5.9	7.1	
Incentive programs for dealers/ dealersmen	7.8	7.8	6.5	6.2	6.9	Not Satisfied

From the above table it can be seen that the dealers are satisfied with the frontline sales departments, there is scope for improvements in terms of softer aspects such as training programs, campaign and promotions and incentive programs. People aspects in functions such as finance and operations also indicate scope for improvements through this study on a relative basis.

V. Results & Discussions:

The survey results show that the organization has a good channel partnership in a growth stage and has high levels of satisfactions across various markets.

From the survey, critical services and facilities to be provided by the company and the obligations of the dealers towards the company have been identified and categorized into vital, essential and desirable categories. The results also indicate the services and facilities which are perceived to be critical to the dealers and how the company has discharged its duties towards a healthy channel relationship.

The dealer company interaction satisfaction index on critical activities indicate that the dealers are satisfied with the frontline sales departments, and there is scope for improvements in terms of softer aspects such as training programs, campaign and promotions and incentive programs. People aspects in functions such as finance and operations also indicate scope for improvements through this study.

VI. Conclusion:

Dealer satisfaction index and dealer-company interaction satisfaction index are the two indices which are the metrics of the level of satisfaction of dealers with the company over service, facilities and interactions. The methodology can be applied to all organizations which have a strong retail network. From the study it is emerges that the dealers as well as the organization are aware of their duties and obligations for a healthy dealer-firm relationship centred around business objectives. DSI overall indicates that dealers are on an Overall basis in a delight category with Company's services and facilities vis a vis their expectations. The survey indicated a strong connect of the Channel partners with the organization. The dealer company interaction satisfaction index has brought out the touch points with various levels of satisfaction and the areas where the organization has scope for improvement.

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