



EU-Japan Centre
for Industrial Cooperation

日欧産業協力センター

CROSS-CULTURAL GROWTH MARKETING & ADVERTISING for the Japanese Market



Co-funded by
the European Union

Patric Sawada,
Silkdrive



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Market Entry Strategies

- How to prepare your product, positioning, and go-to-market approach for Japan
- Understand what it takes to do business with Japanese companies
- What typically slows down or accelerates market entry

Customer Acquisition & Retention

- How to attract and retain Japanese customers through culturally adapted communication
- Trust-building, and service expectations that differ from Western markets
- Offline and online methods, B2C and B2B

Cross-cultural Marketing

- How to adapt to align with Japanese values and communication norms, based on scientific research
- Examples of how European companies have successfully entered the Japanese market.

Trainer: Patric Sawada

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Head of Growth, Silkdrive (The Netherlands)

Extensive Expertise: 11+ years in international business and digital marketing. Proven track record with 50+ clients across 30+ industries.

Hands-on experience: Executed growth marketing projects across Europe, East Asia, and Southeast Asia.

Adapting to Cultural Values: Specialises in adapting marketing and advertising to align with cultural values and behaviours of diverse markets, among which Japan.

Broad Experience: Managed and trained diverse teams (1-10 members) across the globe, including India, Japan, Philippines. Former marketing manager at Ciber (Global IT firm) and former business consultant for Philips.

Diverse Clientele: Worked with multinationals, SMEs, and startups from The Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, France, China, HongKong, Taiwan, Japan. Experience in sectors like IT consulting, SaaS, e-commerce, healthcare, automotive, telecom, retail and consumer goods.



Company: Silkdrive

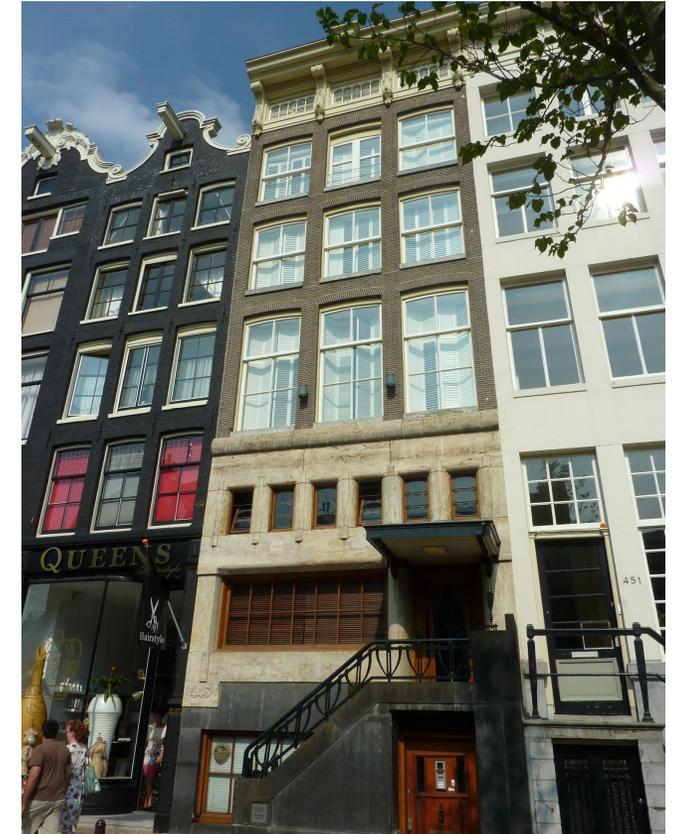
Driving growth, Crossing cultures

Silkdrive is a cross-cultural growth marketing agency. We support our clients with cross-cultural insights and international growth marketing across Europe and East-Asia.

As a full service cross-cultural growth marketing agency we provide a variety of services:

- International Digital Marketing
- Cross-Cultural Insights
- Growth Marketing

We also offer cross-cultural training for doing business in Japan, in partnership with native Japanese trainer and president of the Diversity Management Institute Inc. (Japan), Mr. Takashi Kawatani.



[source: silkdrive.com](https://www.silkdrive.com)



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Market Entry Strategies



IKEA Japan: Initial Failure

- IKEA's first Japan entry in 1974 failed by 1986
- Assumed Japanese consumers would embrace DIY assembly and transport large items themselves
- But: Japanese homes were small, service expectations were high, and public transport was the norm
- IKEA didn't offer delivery or assembly; warehouse model felt foreign and inconvenient
- The retail experience conflicted with cultural preferences



source:ikeamuseum.com

Japan Market Entry

- Japan is the 3rd largest economy, yet culturally challenging to outsiders
- Market access is not fast or frictionless: long decision cycles, trust-based networks
- EU SMEs often underestimate cultural localisation and procedural friction



source: ChatGPT

Japan Readiness Checklist

- Localisation includes etiquette, formats, packaging, customer expectations
- Acceptable product quality is higher; defaults that work in EU feel cheap in Japan
- Without bilingual support, conversion suffers regardless of traffic quality



source: ChatGPT

Business Entry Models

- Online marketplaces (Rakuten, Yahoo! Shopping) are low-risk and trusted by local consumers
- For B2B, cold outreach fails — rely on trade fairs, industry events, and EU-Japan Centre support
- Japanese entry models include: export, direct/marketplace, distributors, agents, joint ventures, subsidiaries — each with trade-offs
- Choose your model based on stage, budget, and need for local control vs. speed

Model	Pros	Cons
Export	Easiest to start, low cost, good for testing demand	No local presence or support, limited trust and scalability
Marketplace	Fast access to Japanese consumers, trusted platforms like Rakuten	Hard to differentiate brand, limited data, high competition
Agent	Low cost, flexible, can help with early B2B outreach	Low commitment, minimal influence on sales or branding
Distributor	Fast market access, trusted by buyers, handles compliance and logistics	Loss of customer control, relies on partner's performance
Direct Sales	Full ownership of customer journey, better data and pricing control	Needs bilingual ops, strong localisation, moderate setup complexity
Joint Venture	Shared investment and risk, high trust, access to networks	Complex legal setup, requires deep cultural alignment
Subsidiary	Full local control, strong brand presence, long-term growth platform	High cost, regulatory burden, long ramp-up time

Common Delays and Accelerators

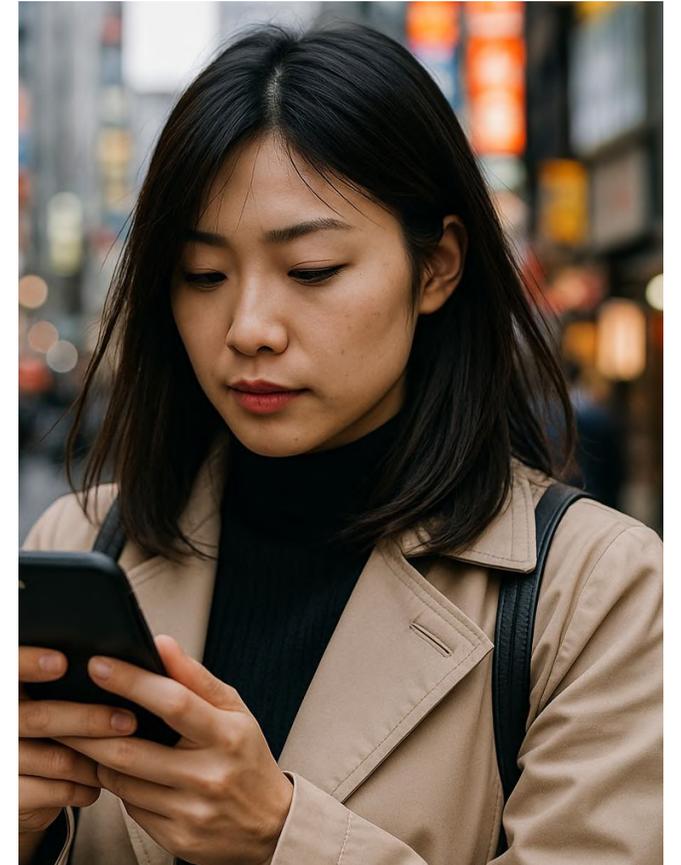
- Japanese buyers often perceive risk where Western audiences see opportunity.
- Delays: lack of social proof, no support in Japanese, unclear pricing
- Accelerators: local testimonials, presence at trusted events, formal material
- Early presence in industry media or award visibility helps reduce perceived risk



source: ChatGPT

B2C-Specific Entry Learnings

- Start with trusted platforms like Rakuten or Amazon Japan — reviews and ratings matter more than your website
- For beauty and personal care, visibility on @cosme is essential for trust and discovery
- LINE is a daily-use platform — use it for respectful, low-pressure engagement with coupons and updates
- Japanese consumers ignore global brand stories — focus on relevance to their lifestyle
- Use soft, clean product videos with Japanese subtitles — avoid humour and loud effects

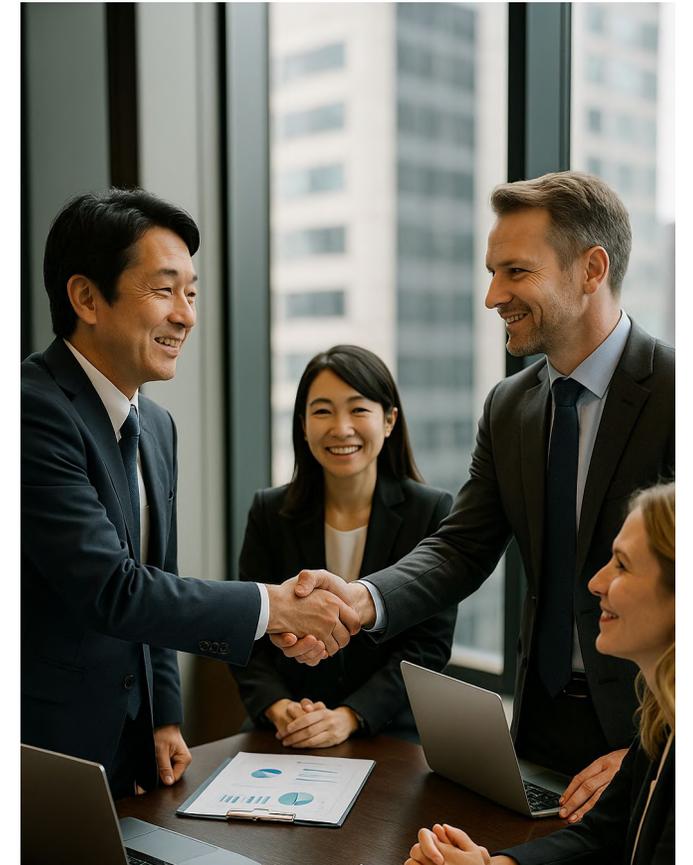


source: ChatGPT



B2B-Specific Entry Learnings

- B2B buyers expect *stability, reputation, and long-term thinking*
- No decision is made by one person. It's a multi-layered internal consensus process, meaning your buyer needs internal validation materials
- Therefore: Printed materials, brochures, detailed spec sheets in Japanese are critical
- Internal champions (aka "your hero") need material they can pass on *without having to translate or explain your value proposition*
- Trust is built slowly, a signed NDA or pilot does not guarantee **sales** unless the internal stakeholders feel secure



source: ChatGPT



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Must-Haves for B2B Sales Enablement

- Create a "handover packet" in Japanese: 1-pager summary, pricing, testimonial, brand story
- Include both PDF and printed versions — many managers still work from printouts
- Use keigo (honorific/formal Japanese), avoid casual design, include real photos of EU team
- Any missing information = excuse for internal rejection (“we can’t explain it well”)



source: ChatGPT

IKEA Japan: Localised Re-Entry

- IKEA re-entered Japan in 2006 after nearly two decades of studying Japanese urban lifestyles, housing norms, and consumer service expectations in depth
- This time, they launched smaller-format urban stores tailored for compact living environments
- Introduced full-service delivery and assembly options, respecting the norm of convenience
- Adapted product range in both scale and design to align with Japanese housing sizes and preferences
- Updated visual presentation, layout and campaigns to align with seasonal and cultural cues



[source: ikeamuseum.com](https://ikeamuseum.com)

Customer Acquisition & Retention

B2C Acquisition Channels

🏠 B2C Acquisition Channels

Channel	Use Case	Why It Works	Tactics
LINE Ads	CRM & coupons	Ubiquitous, integrated	Seasonal coupons, segment by interaction
YouTube	Discovery, reviews	High trust in visual content	Japanese subtitles, soft-toned explainers
Instagram	Visual branding	Strong in lifestyle categories	Seasonal aesthetics
Yahoo! Ads	Older/mobile users	Strong brand trust	Native + display ad mix
@cosme/Kakaku	Review platforms	Consumer trust layer	Accurate listings, manage reviews
TikTok	Gen Z	Localised trends only	Partner with native influencers
Rakuten/Amazon	Entry points	Trusted <u>ecommerce</u>	High-res visuals, detailed copy
Pop-ups/sampling	Physical trust	Experience builds conversion	QR-to-LINE campaign



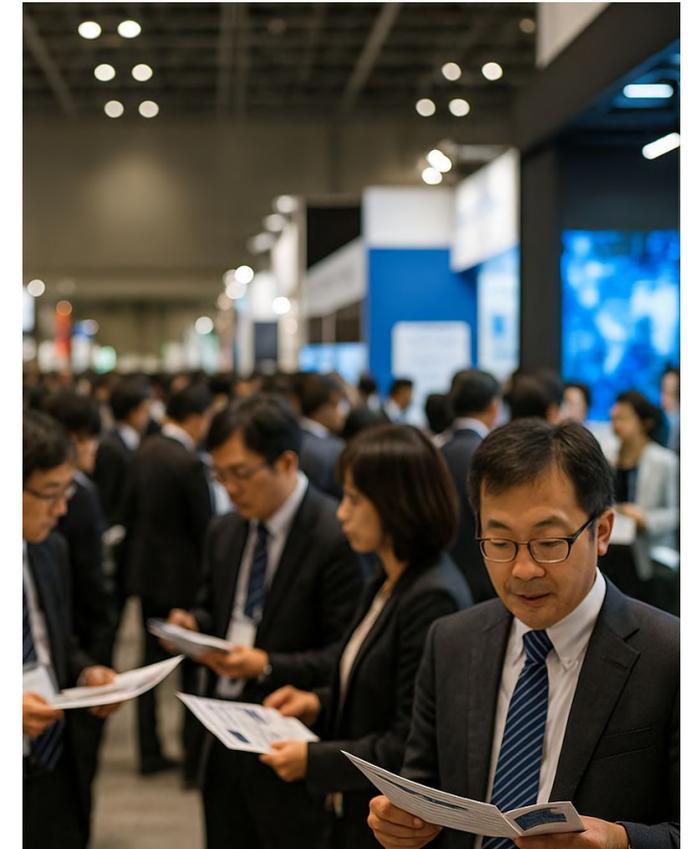
source: ChatGPT



B2B Acquisition Channels

■ B2B Acquisition Channels

Channel	Use Case	Why It Works	Tactics
Trade Shows	Demos, intros	Face-time is key	Pre-book meetings, follow-up protocol
EU-Japan Centre	Matchmaking	Credible entry point	Participate in missions, translate decks
Webinars	Thought leadership	Safe discovery method	Localised, Q&A-focused
Distributors/VARs	Sales proxy	Have local trust	Provide tools, co-brand assets
LinkedIn	Brand presence	Not for outreach	Keep updated JP page only
Facebook	Ongoing validation	Still used in B2B, depending on sector and region	Post product news, media, events
Industry Media	3rd-party trust	Legacy authority	Press releases, interviews
B2B Directories	Search visibility	Decision-makers browse these	Prioritise verified listings



source: ChatGPT



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Retention as Brand Experience

- Support = product; Japanese customers expect formal, prompt response
- Return policies, FAQs, and follow-up define whether they'll recommend you
- Add physical touchpoints: thank-you cards, packaging, seasonal contact



source: ChatGPT

Avoiding Silent Churn

- Japanese customers rarely complain — they silently churn
- Monitor forums, review sites (@cosme, Kakaku, Yahoo! Reviews)
- Follow up after 1st purchase. Surprise + politeness = retention engine



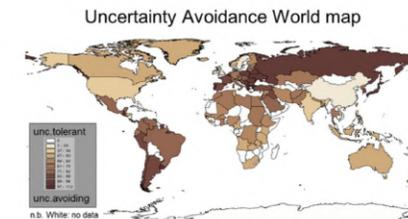
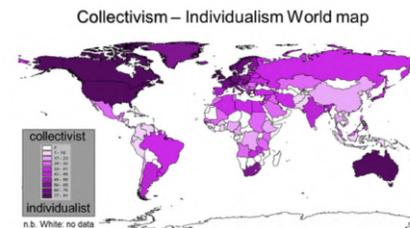
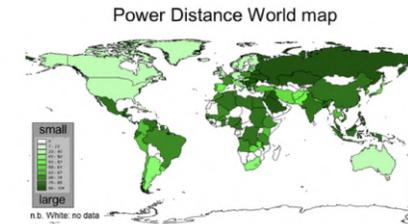
[source:Wikipedia](#)

Cross-cultural Marketing

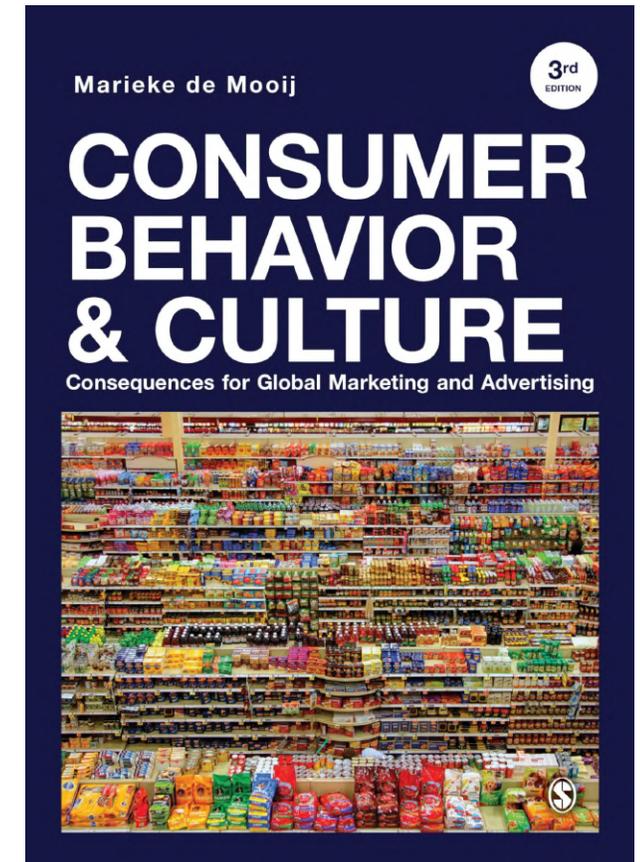


Hofstede & De Mooij: Cross-Cultural Marketing

- Cultural values shape how people interpret messaging, trust brands, and make purchase decisions
- Hofstede's research created the base framework of six dimensions
- De Mooij applied it to consumer behaviour, marketing and advertising



[source: geerthofstede.com](http://source:geerthofstede.com)

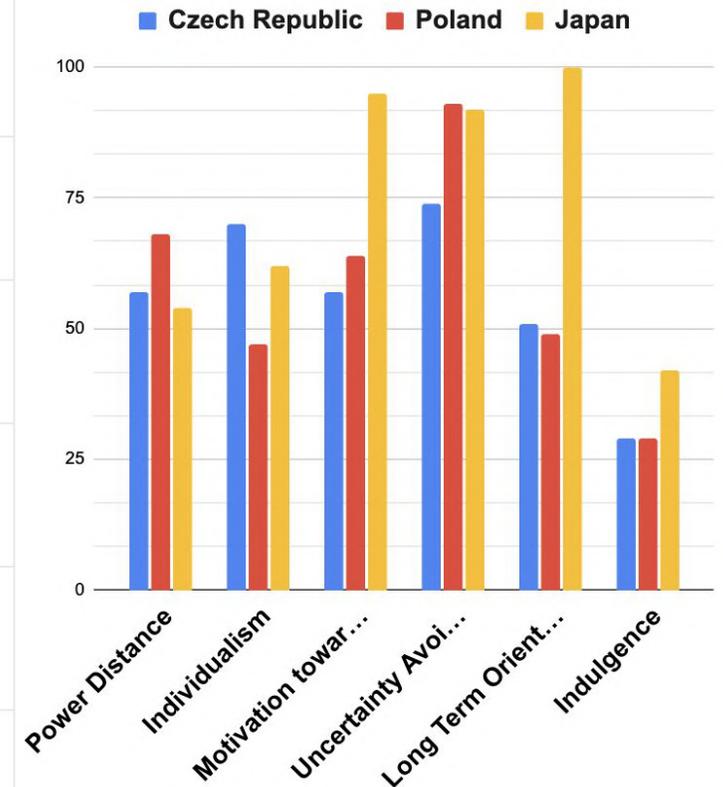


[source: mariekedemooij.com](http://source:mariekedemooij.com)

Cultural Comparison: Japan

Dimension	Definition	Poland	Czech	Japan	Implication for Japan
PDI Power Distance	Degree to which less powerful members accept unequal power distribution	68	57	54	Japan is moderately hierarchical. Respect for structure, but decisions require consensus. Don't over-rely on titles.
IDV Individualism	Preference for a loosely-knit vs. tightly-knit social framework	60	58	46	Japan is collectivist. Group harmony matters. Avoid ego-based marketing. Highlight shared outcomes.
MAS Masculinity	Degree to which a society values achievement, performance, and competitiveness	64	57	95	Japan values performance but modestly. Use third-party proof, not bold claims. Understatement = credibility.
UAI Uncertainty Avoidance	Extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguity and prefer rules and structure	93	74	92	Similar to Poland. Japanese avoid risk. Provide detailed info, clear support, and formal processes.
LTO Long-Term Orientation	Degree to which society maintains a pragmatic, future-oriented perspective	38	70	88	Japan is deeply long-term. Stress continuity, reliability, and future benefit. Avoid <u>short-termism</u> .
IVR Indulgence	Extent to which people control or allow gratification of desires and emotions	29	29	42	All low. Japan is slightly higher but still restrained. Avoid emotional or casual messaging. Use formal tone and emotionally restrained communication.

Hofstede's Dimensions



Simple Failures: Groupon & Vodafone

- **Groupon:** failed during a New Year campaign for a traditional New Year's osechi meal
- The promotion went viral, demand outpaced supply, supplier failed; meals arrived late or poorly packaged
- Reputational damage: partner quality and logistics reflect directly on the brand in Japan
- **Vodafone:** aggressive sales style, minimal localisation of devices/services.
- Failed to gain trust, seen as outsider.



[source:Wikipedia](#)

SOCKSSS Case Study

- Swedish sock brand for premium, sustainable socks
- Chose Japan for expansion due to existing demand and environmental concerns: set up local production in Nara to reduce emissions and shipping costs
- Japanese customers responded differently than expected to the Japan-made collection
- Used Instagram and local sales agents for exposure; held regular showrooms in Tokyo
- Benefited from the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA)

Further reading:

 <https://www.eu-japan.eu/publications/case-study-socksss>



source: EU Japan centre / SOCKSSS



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KitKat: Cultural Integration

- Entry began in 1973; popularity surged from 2001 due to cultural-linguistic alignment; Kitto Katsu (きっと勝つ), translated as "You will surely win"
- Sales spike around exam season led to Japan Post partnership and the postable KitKat (2009)
- Chef Takagi introduced artisan flavours from 2005, elevating brand status (Chocolatory range)
- Over 300 region-specific and seasonal variants supported gifting, collectability, and retail integration
- KitKat became both a mass-market and premium gift, embedded into Japan's seasonal and travel culture



[source:Wikipedia](#)

The logo features a blue background with a stylized map of Europe on the left and a red sun on the right. Five yellow stars are arranged in an arc over the European map. The text 'EU-Japan Centre for Industrial Cooperation' is written in white serif font in the upper right corner.

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Q&A Session

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