

Assessment of Public Relations for Effective Healthcare Service Delivery

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Abstract

Public Relations plays a critical role in shaping the reputation and operational success of healthcare organizations. Effective PR strategies ensure clear communication, foster trust, and enhance patient satisfaction. This paper assesses the role of public relations in effective healthcare service delivery, exploring its impact on patient engagement, crisis management, and institutional credibility. Healthcare institutions operate in a dynamic environment where patient trust, regulatory compliance, and public perception significantly influence their success. PR serves as a bridge between healthcare providers and the public, ensuring transparency, managing reputations, and facilitating effective communication. This study examines the role of PR in healthcare and evaluates its effectiveness in service delivery. Public Relations in healthcare plays a crucial role in patient communication and engagement by establishing clear and transparent communication with patients. It ensures that healthcare information is accurately disseminated to the public and supports patient education campaigns that improve health literacy and encourage preventive care. Additionally, PR is essential in crisis management as it helps healthcare organizations handle emergencies such as disease outbreaks, medical errors, and negative press. Effective crisis communication mitigates panic and ensures that accurate information reaches the public. The paper concludes that public relations is a fundamental tool for enhancing healthcare service delivery. By fostering trust, managing crises effectively, and ensuring clear communication, PR contributes to better patient outcomes and institutional credibility. Healthcare organizations must invest in robust PR strategies to navigate the evolving landscape of public health communication and strengthen their relationships with the communities they serve.

Keywords

Assessment, Effective, Healthcare, Public Relations and Service Delivery



I. Introduction

In the time past, health care PR professionals, felt little need to create awareness or preference because hospitals had always received public support and favour (Tomic, et al., 2010). Public relations did not need to be proactive to maintain and build on public confidence. Rather, public relations roles were limited to the communication of information and positive changes. But today, even as government tries to improve the health sector, public hospitals face challenges such as new technologies, rising costs, limited resources and frequent criticism by the public as lacking effective service delivery as patients complain of inadequate facilities by government hospitals, long waiting time, neglect by and insults from hospital workers and other forms of negative attitude of the hospital staff, a situation

compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic which has put strains on the healthcare facilities, health workers as well as the patients (Ahmed & Msughter, 2022).

Public Relations (PR) plays a vital role in ensuring effective healthcare service delivery by fostering trust, enhancing communication, and promoting positive engagement between healthcare institutions and their stakeholders. A well-structured PR strategy helps healthcare organizations maintain a strong reputation, build public confidence, and improve overall patient satisfaction. One of the primary functions of PR in healthcare is building trust and credibility. Transparent communication through media engagement, community outreach, and digital platforms ensures that the public receives accurate and timely health information (Airaoje et al., 2024). When healthcare institutions actively share updates about medical advancements, policy changes, and public health initiatives, they create a sense of reliability and dependability among patients and stakeholders.

Effective PR also facilitates patient-centered communication, ensuring that healthcare information is conveyed in a way that patients can easily understand. Simplifying medical terminology, addressing common health concerns through awareness campaigns, and creating open channels for patient feedback contribute to improved healthcare experiences. When patients feel heard and well-informed, they are more likely to engage positively with healthcare services. Media and community engagement are essential components of PR strategies in healthcare. By collaborating with journalists, healthcare institutions can ensure that accurate and informative news about health services and public health concerns is disseminated (Airaoje et al., 2023). Community outreach initiatives, such as health fairs and vaccination drives, further reinforce the connection between healthcare providers and the communities they serve. These efforts contribute to increased awareness and accessibility of healthcare services, ultimately improving public health outcomes.

Alough et al., (2023) observed that internal communication within healthcare organizations is equally important. PR helps facilitate smooth communication between management and staff, ensuring that healthcare professionals remain informed and motivated. Employee engagement programs, internal newsletters, and digital communication platforms contribute to a cohesive and well-functioning healthcare workforce. A motivated team leads to improved patient care and overall service efficiency. In today's digital age, leveraging online platforms for PR efforts has become increasingly important. Social media and digital campaigns allow healthcare organizations to reach wider audiences with educational content, health updates, and interactive discussions. Engaging with patients and stakeholders through social media platforms fosters transparency and enhances the credibility of healthcare institutions.

Public awareness campaigns play a crucial role in promoting preventive healthcare and encouraging positive health behaviors. Through strategic PR initiatives, healthcare institutions can educate the public on various health issues, advocate for lifestyle changes, and promote the utilization of available healthcare services. Collaborating with community leaders, influencers, and policymakers helps amplify these messages, making them more impactful. Strong media relations and press engagement further support effective healthcare PR strategies. Issuing timely press releases about medical breakthroughs, institutional achievements, and policy changes keeps the public informed and engaged (Airaoje et al., 2024). Hosting press conferences and engaging with health journalists ensures that healthcare-related news is accurately reported and widely disseminated. A well-executed PR strategy in healthcare enhances service delivery by promoting transparency, fostering trust,

and ensuring effective communication between healthcare providers and the public. By integrating best PR practices, healthcare institutions can improve patient satisfaction, strengthen stakeholder relationships, and contribute to better overall public health outcomes.

II. Review of Literature

Theoretical Foundation

The paper adopted the Excellence, which was headed by James E. Grunig and funded by the Foundation of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) in 1985. Based on a number of middle-range theories, and tested with surveys and interviews of professionals and CEOs in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and South Korea, the Excellence theory provides a “theoretical and empirical benchmark” for Public Relations units. The theory stated that the value of public relations lies in organisation-public relations. Good relationship with its strategic publics is helpful for an organization to develop and achieve goals desired by both the organization and its publics, reduce costs of negative publicity, and increase revenue by providing products and services needed by stakeholders (Grunig & Grunig, 2008). According to Grunig (2001), in the excellence study which metamorphosed into excellence theory, he and his research team addressed the research question “how, why, and to what extent does communication contribute to the achievement of organizational objectives?” The team, however, realised that many organizations do not manage communication programs.

Strategically and that these programs do not make their organizations more effective. Thus, the team added what it called the excellence question: “How must public relations be practiced and the communication function organized for it to contribute the most to organizational effectiveness?” (Grunig, 2001). Expounding on the theory, Grunig and Grunig (2008) stated that:

The excellence theory explained the value of public relations to organizations and society based on the social responsibility of managerial decisions and the quality of relationships with stakeholder publics. For an organization to be effective, according to the theory, it must behave in ways that solve the problems and satisfy the goals of stakeholders as well as of management.... If it does not, stakeholders will either pressure the organization to change or oppose it in ways that add cost and risk to organizational policies and decisions. To behave in socially acceptable ways, organizations must scan their environment to identify publics who are affected by potential organizational decisions or who want organizations to make decisions to solve problems that are important to them. Then, organizations must communicate symmetrically with publics (taking the interests of both the organization and publics into account) to cultivate high-quality, long-term relationships with them (p1).

The above shows that the excellence theory is a framework that spells out the role of public relations in making organisations more effective, meaning that any organisation that desires effectiveness, needs to embrace public relations in its relationship with its identified and important publics. As Grunig (2001) pointed out, to maximize the value of public relations, public relations must identify strategic publics and build long-term relationships with them through symmetrical communication programs.

The Excellence study identified four categories of features of effective public relations:

- a. Empowerment of public relations function: effective organization must empower public relations as a critical management function

- b. Communicator roles: public relations executives should be made to play managerial role as well as administrative role
- c. Organization of communication function: public relations should be an integrated communication function separate from instead of being sublimated to marketing or other management functions
- d. Public relations models: effective organization should base its internal and external communication and relationship building on two-way symmetrical model. (Grunig & Grunig, 2008).

Throwing more light on the fourth characteristic, Grunig and Grunig (2008) stated that the excellence study showed that a symmetrical system of internal communication increased employees' satisfaction with their jobs and with the organization. However, internal communication generally was not practiced unless organizations had a participative rather than authoritarian culture and a decentralized, less stratified (organic) structure rather than a centralized, stratified (mechanical) structure (Vitalis et al., 2025).

The excellence theory evolved from four approaches: goal attainment, systems, strategic constituencies and competing values, with the competing values approach bridging the gap between strategic constituencies and organization's goals by stating that an organization must integrate strategic constituencies' values with its goals so that the organization attains the goals of most value to its strategic constituencies.

Scholars have replicated the excellence study around the world. Results from these studies extended the Excellence theory into a global public relations theory, which provides generic principles that are understood in the same way around the world and can be operated effectively in most nations. The global public relations theory also suggests that practice in different countries should be different based on culture, the political or economic system, media system, level of economic development, and extent and nature of activism in a certain country.

The excellence theory gives valuable insights into the role of public relations in organizational success. Organizations that appreciate the importance of building and maintaining relationships with strategic publics can make more informed decisions about their public relations strategies and ultimately achieve their goals (Usman et al., 2022).

Some scholars have described the excellence theory as idealistic, arguing that it may be unrealistic or unattainable in certain situations. Karlberg (1996) stated that the excellence theory is overly concerned with consumers as a primary audience. To him, the research team missed an opportunity to explore the broader implications of the relationship between an organization and its markets. Leichthy (1997) observed that certain kinds of conflicts require asymmetric or win-lose that completely collaborative public relations is not feasible in some situations, and stated that public relations practitioners' lack of power within an organization further increases the limitation of collaboration. Leichthy (1997) is thus opposed to the two-way symmetrical concept of the theory. Similarly, Pieczka (1996) said that the two-way symmetrical component of the excellence theory is over-idealised and so attacked the research agenda from which it was developed and the premise of systems theory on which the model is based.

In their opinion, Leitch and Neilson (2001) challenged the rigid nature of the excellence theory. They believed that the publics are not fixed categories waiting to be identified but, are formed dynamically through the conversation in which they participate. In their own observation, Edwards and Hodges (2011) argued that Grunig's rigid focus on organization theory overlooks the social world in which those organizations operate. Murphy (1991) pointed out that the concept of symmetrical communication works along a continuum from pure conflict to pure cooperation, which is based on mixed motives while Cameron,

Pang and Jin in Aondover (202) and his colleagues suggested that the true excellence in public relations may result from picking the appropriate point along the continuum that best fits the current need of the organisation and its publics.

The excellence theory provides a guide on how public relations is practised or is to be practiced in an organization by spelling out four characteristics of effective public relations, which are empowerment of public relations functions, communicator role, organization of communication function and public relations model, in which Grunig and Grunig (2008) pointed out the need for an effective organization to base its internal and external communication and relationship building on two-way symmetrical model. The excellence theory is, therefore useful in guiding the research in its efforts at examining the practice of public relations with the internal (staff) and external (patients/relatives) publics.

III. Result and Discussion

3.1 Public Relations

Different scholars, public relations professionals and public relations institutes have given vast and different definitions of public relations in an attempt to describe what PR professionals do. To Cohen (2011) traditionally, public relations refers to the art of getting mentions of a person, company, or other organization placed in the media, namely print, radio and television. Public relations has evolved overtime spurning broader and more encompassing definitions. A definition common among practitioners and scholars is that given by the British Institute of Public Relations (BIPR) as the deliberate, planned and sustained efforts to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics.

To Jefkins as cited in Nkwocha (1999), public relations consists of all forms of planned communication, outwards and inwards, between an organisation and its publics for the purpose of achieving specific objectives concerning mutual understanding. Jefkins' definition expatiates on the BIPR version and emphasises the achievement of specific objectives that will lead to mutual understanding. These objectives as Onyiengo (2014) observed, "often involves solving communication problems e.g. converting negative attitudes into positive attitudes, that is, effecting change."

Many other scholars have since come up with other detailed definitions. To Cutlip et al., (2006), public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends. The conception by Cutlip et al (2006) is in line with that of the Canadian Public Relations Society adopted in 2009 and which says that public relations is the strategic management of relationship between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organisational goals, and serve the public interest. One thing noticeably common among these definitions is mutual understanding or mutual relationship. This means that public relations can be said to be effective when there is mutual support between the organization and its publics. To Valjak and Draskovic (2016), "overall, one may say that public relations is concerned with creating a favorable image, or..., a favorable reputation (p. 252).

However, there are misconceptions about public relations, not only among the laymen, but also among PR professionals. According to Ajala as cited in Owolabi (2007), a layman sees public relations as a simple means of covering up past mistakes, means of gaining media coverage, publicity seeking events and mechanism for personal empire building. But, Nwosu as cited in Nkwocha (1999) explained that PR is based on a two-way communication which leads to mutual understanding. It is a top management function based

on moral principles. The fundamental purpose of public relations practice is to establish a two-way flow of mutual understanding based on truth, knowledge and full information (Aondover et al., 2022).

The formal practice of public relations dates back to the early 20th century with many early forms of public influence and communication management in ancient civilization, according to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Edward Bernays, one of the pioneers of PR penned that the three main elements of public relations: informing people, persuading people, or integrating people with people are practically as old as society. Valjak and Draskovic (2016) corroborated this view as he stated that although articulated in many words and forms, public relations was at the beginning of primary civilization. One-way communication that influenced viewpoints is traced to the earliest civilization. The ancient Greeks and Romans made use of public relations so as to spread their messages throughout the cultures. Aristotle's use of rhetoric which enables persuasive communication and Sophists and Protagoras' teaching for people to exploit their points of view are also likened to public relations. At the early modern era, a form of public relations named 'propaganda' came into being and was used during the American Revolution against the British monarchy.

As academic Betteke Van Ruler stated, public relations activities began in Europe as a profession in the 1920s. With time, several organizations were established to represent the interest of public relations practitioners, resulting in the formation of the Public Relations Practitioners Association in 1947 the Institute of Public Relations (now the Chartered Institute of Public Relations) was established in 1948. Similar trade associations were created in Australia, Europe, South Africa, Italy, Singapore, etc (Hile et al., 2022).

In Nigeria, public relations began during the colonial period with the establishment of the first newspaper in the country called "Iwe Irohin" by the late Reverend Henry Townsend in 1859. Overtime, PR has evolved in the country. Today, there are many practitioners under the association named Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) established in 1963 and chartered via Decree No.16 (Act of Parliament) of the Federal Government, 1990.

3.2 Functions of Public Relations

The primary function of public relations is to build a mutually beneficial relationship between an organisation and its publics. As cited in Valjak and Draskovic (2016), Msughter et al., (2023) identified the main functions as: Internal Relations - this refers to the communication processes aimed at an organisation's internal public. Internal relations manage the communication inside the organisation, managing the information that employees receive. The public relations department organizes communication programs to keep employees motivated. Internal relations is meant to take care of everyone within the organization.

Publicity - Publicity refers to the communication activities provided by an outside source in cases when the communicated information is valuable as news to the wider public. Being mostly a free-of-charge communication, publicity is the hardest form of communication to control. There is no control in when the information is used, how it is used and if it is used. Publicity, as a tool of public relations, is used for all aspects of our lives, from political use, marketing use to image clarification, etc.

Lobbying - is a narrow specialised branch of public relations with the goal to create and maintain relations with government and governmental bodies to influence legislation and regulations. Because of popular belief that lobbying is related to bribery and threats, it is highly criticised and frowned upon. Despite that general mark, lobbying is a legal way to influence government decision making.

Advertising – could be considered as a media for placing PR messages. In this context, PR uses advertising as a tool to approach wider public through mass media by controlling the content, placing and timing. Although, advertising typically falls under the category of commercial goods or services marketing, it is not solely reserved for it. Public relations can use advertisements as part of the communication effort with external public in order to improve corporate image, tackle some environmental issues, motivate volunteers, etc. Public Affairs – refers to the specialized part of PR that “builds and maintains relationship with government agencies and community stakeholder groups in order to influence government policy” (Namadi & Aondover, 2020). Public affairs can be explained as PR tactics applied to government relations strategies to produce excellent public policy.

Press Agency – is a field in PR that attracts public attention more than it builds public understanding, following the pattern, the more the news coverage, the better. It creates stories to attract the media and gain public notice. Investor Relations – is also known as financial relations. It is part of public relations that works in publicly held corporations (i.e. joint stock companies). Investor relations communication activities are focused on a specific target group, the investors and the financial community (e.g. investment banks). The goal of investor relations is to raise the value of company’s stocks.

Development – (or advancement) is a part of public relations that is most commonly used in non-profit organizations. Because non-profit organizations depend on donations, fees and volunteers, they become dependent on campaigns and special events to gain public support and contributions. As Broom explained, development is a specialized part of public relations that only focuses on raising money for non-profit organizations through maintaining relationships with donors, organizing charity events, auctions, etc. Issues Management – is a function of public relations that anticipates, prepares and reacts in crisis or whenever there is a need to respond to public policy issues. Issues management preserves the relationship of an organization with its publics (Heath in Valjak & Draskovic, 2016).

Crisis communication – is another function of public relations that helps protect and defend an individual, company or organization that is facing a challenge to its reputation.

Also, Nkwocha (1999) identified functions of public relations as follows:

1. Publicising an organisation’s or client’s activities and maintaining cordial relations with the media (information and communication)
2. Publishing corporate publications
3. Research on corporate image, publics’ motivation, issues and trends, etc.
4. Corporate strategy and policy formulation
5. Corporate social responsibility/community relations
6. Advising and counseling management and clients on issues and policies that have consequences on image and reputation.
7. Protocol
8. Employee relations
9. Marketing support
10. Corporate identity management
11. Organising special events such as courtesy visits, annual general meetings, award nights, etc.
12. International public relations.

Most of, if not all these functions are expected to be performed by the public relations department or unit of an organization, a hospital inclusive (be it for-profit or not-for profit) to bring about a mutual understanding between an organization and its publics.

3.3 Publics of Public Relations

The word “publics” refers to people or a group of people who have a direct or indirect association with an organization. It is used to mean those groups with whom an organization communicates internally and externally. According to Reddy (2017), ‘publics’ in public relations parlance mean those group or groups of people whose opinion has a direct bearing on the functioning of an organization. According to Baran (2004), public relations practitioners communicate with the following seven categories of publics as:

1. Employees: Good public relations begins at home with this group. Newsletters, social events, internal and external recognition of superior performances make employees feel at home, motivated to work. For effective employee relations, Center et al. (2008) provides the following set of rules:
 - a. Tell employees first.
 - b. Tell bad and good news together
 - c. Be timely.
 - d. Inform employees on subjects important to them.
 - e. Use media trusted by employees.
2. Stockholders: They own an organization. Their goodwill is necessary for the business to operate. For instance, National Eye Centre is owned by the federal government and overseen on its behalf by the federal ministry of health which requires an annual report of its activities and other means of monitoring the hospital’s service delivery.
3. Communities: an organization has a neighbourhood where it operates. Courtesy demands that an organization’s neighbours be treated with friendship and support. A health organization can hold information meetings, offer free medical outreaches to the neighbours once in a while, subsidise some services to strengthen ties between the organization and its neighbours. For instance, National Eye Centre conducts free screening/surgeries for communities around the hospital like Mahuta, Afaka-Mando, etc.
4. Media: Trust and goodwill of professionals within the mass media will help the organization to communicate effectively with its various publics. National Eye Centre’s activities such as events marking the World Sight Day and World Glaucoma Day receive favourable coverage in the Nigerian media since the hospital through its public relations unit has built trust and goodwill with the media.
5. Government, as ‘the voice of the people’, deserves the attention of any organization that deals with the public. Organisations must earn and maintain the goodwill and trust of the government. Health organisations - be they private or public - have to work closely with the government in disseminating the government’s health policy. Helping government to carry out its health care services for the people enhances mutual understanding between the government and health institutions.
6. Investment Community: Organisations are under constant scrutiny of those who invest their own money, invest other people’s money or make recommendations of investment. An organization must earn respect and trust of those people. Public relations efforts build an organisation’s good image with that community. For instance, National Eye Centre being a not- for- profit hospital receives support in terms of materials, expertise training from international eye care service organisations such as Sight Savers International, Christoffen Blidden, other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and some good-spirited individuals who make donations to the hospital once in a while. To earn their trust and respect, the organization must maintain a positive image and goodwill with those donors.

7. Customers: Customers or clients pay for goods and services they receive. In the case of hospitals, they are the patients who access hospital services. They pay for health services received. Patients are the major and most important public in a hospital setting because without them, the hospital can't operate. In the case of National Eye Centre, Kaduna, they are mostly eye patients.

3.4 Public Relations Tools

Public relations, as earlier said, is the art of creating and maintaining mutual understanding between an organization and its various “publics”. To reach these heterogeneous publics, an organization has to decide the media and channels best suited for its message and the publics. There are professionally identified tools with which the PR practitioners can communicate with the organisation’s publics. According to Business Queensland (2017), by using proven public relations tools and activities, you can promote positive attitudes and behaviours towards your business that will help convert interested consumers into customers. In order to build a relationship with the target audience and maintain it on a high level, PR specialists use a variety of tools and techniques (Obada et al., 2024). Some of the most common ones, according to the Institute of Public Relations (2012) and Reddy (2017) are:

- 1) Press releases,
- 2) Attendance at public events,
- 3) Newsletters,
- 4) Blogging,
- 5) Meeting,
- 6) Annual reports
- 7) Photographs

Others include brochures and catalogues, advertorials, social media, sponsorships or partnerships and community relations.

3.5 Public Relations as a Management Function

According to the American Institute of Management as cited in Bagobiri and Kassah (2009), Management is used to designate either a group of functions or the personnel/human resource that carry them out. Public relations is seen as a management function because it strictly manages the interest of an organization. Cutlip et al., (2006) defined public relations as the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends. Vercic et al., (1996) opined that “excellent public relations units must have at least one senior communication manager who conceptualises and directs PR programs or this direction will be supplied by other members of the dominant coalition who have no knowledge of communication or relationship building” (p.38). This statement is supported by McCann as cited in Mehta and Xavier (2009) when she stated that, “to make a real difference, communicators need to have a seat at the table where decisions are made” (pg 190).

Making public relations a management function has been constantly raised since the 1960s and the involvement of public relations in decision making has been discussed by scholars ever since Dozier et al., (1992) argued that if practitioners are to help organizations adapt to changes in the environment, they must participate in the management decision-making process, not simply implement decisions made by others. Since then, public relations practitioners have been expected to participate in and influence the organizational decision-making process (Obada et al., 2021).

This explains why in the organogram of many organizations, especially government-owned, the public relations department/unit is directly under the office of the Chief Executive. That notwithstanding, public relations managers are seldomly allowed to be part of the top decision making body of the organization. Thus, despite the important role of the public relations practitioners, they are often not yet seen as formal members of the management team when it comes to strategic decision making. A view also corroborated by Carroll (as cited in Markus and Marita 2015)

3.6 Communication, Public Relations and Customer Satisfaction

Communication is a critical tool of public relations as it helps to transmit an organization's messages to its customers. There have been debates on the influence that public relations activities have on customers (a key external public of the organisation). Public relations, through various communicative activities, helps create a mutual understanding and trust between an organisation and its publics to the extent that the customers continue to patronize the organization's products/services. Thus, both public relations and customer service rest on effective communication. In a study, Bruning and Ledingham (1998) found out that customer satisfaction is influenced by the relationship that exists between an organization and its key publics. To fully satisfy your customers, you need to give them a complete experience of interactions with your organization, rather than a one-way conversation with them. Kuzel (2021) further observed that good public relations opens up communication with an organisation's publics and translates into several benefits for the organization. This, he said, includes upgrading the customer experience, driving loyalty for the organisation's goods and services, in the end improving customer satisfaction and drawing in more potential clients. This shows that there is a link between public relations activities and customer satisfaction (Obada et al., 2021).

IV. Conclusion

Public Relations in healthcare plays a crucial role in patient communication and engagement by establishing clear and transparent communication with patients. It ensures that healthcare information is accurately disseminated to the public and supports patient education campaigns that improve health literacy and encourage preventive care. Additionally, PR is essential in crisis management as it helps healthcare organizations handle emergencies such as disease outbreaks, medical errors, and negative press. Effective crisis communication mitigates panic and ensures that accurate information reaches the public. Case studies highlight successful PR crisis interventions in healthcare and demonstrate the value of well-coordinated communication efforts. The paper concludes that public relations is a fundamental tool for enhancing healthcare service delivery. By fostering trust, managing crises effectively, and ensuring clear communication, PR contributes to better patient outcomes and institutional credibility. Healthcare organizations must invest in robust PR strategies to navigate the evolving landscape of public health communication and strengthen their relationships with the communities they serve.

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