THE YEAR AHEAD

With many of 2012’s challenges continuing into 2013, Singapore’s SMEs are looking to enhanced productivity and opportunities in overseas markets to drive growth in the coming year.

THE GREEN WAY TO SUCCESS
Hydroemission Corporation is moving ahead with plans to expand its overseas footprint and improve its product offerings.

A NEW RECIPE FOR 2013
Hai’s plans to boost revenues in 2013 through product innovation and expansion into new markets, with China identified as a key target.
in THIS issue

**Feature Story**

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**Featured SME 1**

The Green Way to Success 6

**Featured SME 2**

A New Recipe for 2013 8

**Featured SME 3**

Expansion on the Menu 10

**Featured SME 4**

Sharing for Foodies 13

**Q&A with ACE**

Building for the Future 14

**Insights**

Attracting Young Talent to SMEs 16

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SPRING Singapore is an agency under the Ministry of Trade and Industry responsible for helping Singapore enterprises grow and building trust in Singapore products and services. As the enterprise development agency, SPRING works with partners to help enterprises in financing, capability and management development, technology and innovation, and access to markets. As the national standards and accreditation body, SPRING develops and promotes an internationally-recognised standards and quality assurance infrastructure. SPRING also oversees the safety of general consumer goods in Singapore.

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Visit to Manufacturing Integration Technology

Mr S. Iswaran, Second Minister for Trade and Industry, visited a local precision engineering firm, Manufacturing Integration Technology (MIT), on 15 January. Mr Iswaran noted that MIT is an excellent example of how technology can be harnessed to grow the business. MIT’s annual revenue rose from $32 million in 2008 to $51 million last year while productivity soared 51 per cent. MIT was able to achieve this while ensuring that 80 per cent of its workforce in Singapore is local. Its successful restructuring is a good example of the kind of economic transformation that the Government is encouraging among our SMEs, said Mr Iswaran.

Business Continuity Management Awards 2013

20 local companies were recognised on 24 January for their commitment towards building business resilience at the Business Continuity Management (BCM) Awards 2013. This is an initiative of the Singapore Business Federation (SBF), supported by SPRING Singapore. At the event, SBF also launched the BCM Ambassador programme, and appointed its first batch of BCM Ambassadors – companies that have demonstrated leadership in promoting BCM adoption in their respective industries. Companies keen to put in place a robust BCM system are encouraged to adopt the new SS ISO 22301. They may apply for funding under the National BCM Programme to defray part of the costs involved.

Netherlands-Singapore SME Seminar

Some 150 Dutch and Singaporean SME representatives gathered at the Netherlands-Singapore SME Seminar on 24 January to discuss best practices in developing the SME sector and harnessing innovation for productivity growth. Her Majesty Queen Beatrix and Their Royal Highnesses The Prince of Orange, and Princess Máxima of The Netherlands graced the event, which is supported by the Dutch Embassy and SPRING Singapore.

Launch of Technical Reference on Recreational Diving

The Singapore Standards Council and the National Water Safety Council (NWSC) launched the technical reference on 7 January. The event was co-organised by NWSC and the Singapore Manufacturing Federation Standards Development Organisation (SMF-SDO). The Guest-of-Honour Dr Teo Ho Pin (right), Chairman of the NWSC, said recreational diving is becoming popular, and while accidents have been few and far between, they can be prevented with better understanding and rigorous application of safety requirements. The Singapore Underwater Federation will use the technical reference as the basis for DiveSafer – a new certification programme for diving operators that will be introduced in April this year.
THE YEAR AHEAD

With many of 2012’s challenges continuing into 2013, Singapore’s SMEs are looking to enhanced productivity and opportunities in overseas markets to drive growth in the coming year.

As SMEs form their expectations and implement their plans for 2013, they must contend with a challenging business environment. The combination of an uncertain global economic outlook, rising costs and a tight labour market at home is cause for concern. For companies with the drive to grow and succeed, however, there are ample opportunities to improve operations, expand into new markets, and innovate new products and services.

Productivity will play an important role in business success as companies look to do more with their existing resources by streamlining processes and boosting efficiency. At the same time, revenue growth will be imperative to counter rising costs, and many companies are turning to markets around the region and worldwide to expand their customer base and drive new business.

In 2013, we will also see Singapore’s start-up community continue to develop, as entrepreneurs take up the challenge of turning their innovative ideas into emerging businesses. With strong support from the Action Community for Entrepreneurship, these start-ups will find themselves part of the growing ecosystem of enterprising Singaporeans eager to reap the rewards of building their own business.

As we look forward to an exciting and productive 2013, we turn to SMEs, as well as some of the organisations that support them, to share their plans and expectations for the year ahead.

EILEEN YEO,
Director, M.I.C.E Global

"We have many exciting plans for 2013 as we continue to grow our business in Singapore and overseas. We will be expanding our training business in Pakistan, where M.I.C.E Global made important inroads in 2012, and will also venture into the promising oil and gas markets in the Middle East. To address the challenging labour market, we will be focusing on developing our company’s HR function in 2013, which is critical given our high dependence on human capital. By improving our human capital management processes, we hope to be able to better motivate and retain staff."
Michaël Toh, Managing Director, Air Division

there is no doubt that 2012 was a tough year, with local and global economic concerns affecting our retail business. However, there were several bright spots, including some positive developments in our export markets. The winning of the world-renowned iF Product Design award, as well as several other initiatives we have in the pipeline, will help us engage our customers better and enhance our brand recall – two key areas of focus for Air Division in 2013. Internally, a focus on improving our productivity is a priority, and on the product front, we will continue to create great designs this year!

Hugh Mason, CEO, Joyful Frog Digital Incubator

2012 was intense for JFDI.Asia and the start-ups that joined our first seed accelerator programme. In 100 days, we took 11 teams of entrepreneurs from idea to investment, with more than 60 per cent raising an average of $540,000 in seed funding. Looking ahead, we’re excited to see more Singaporeans viewing entrepreneurship as a credible life-path. They sense the opportunity as another billion people come online for the first time in Southeast Asia. That’s the world into which we will launch 20 to 30 start-ups in 2013, mapping and teaching what we learn alongside them through partnerships with the Singapore University of Technology and Design and the Institute of Systems Science at the National University of Singapore. It’s encouraging too that so many multinationals want to join our innovation forums. This year I am sure we will see new models emerging as they link their market insights to the energy of start-ups and together co-create valuable new businesses.

Thomas Chua, Chairman and Managing Director, Teckwah

In 2013, we expect to see many of the challenges we face, such as price pressure from our customers and rising business costs, becoming more acute. To address these issues, we implemented 18 productivity improvement projects in 2012, including our Total Learning Plan, which instils the mindset in our staff that productivity improvement is everybody’s responsibility. We will continue to push ahead with these projects in 2013, as well as identify new productivity initiatives.

There are many exciting developments coming up, including the ramping up of our new plants in Iskandar, Malaysia, and Wuxi, China. In addition, we will be developing a new suite of specialised print services in anticipation of the opening of our Pixel Red print media hub here in Singapore, which is slated for mid-2014.

Dr Zenton Goh, CEO, Cadi Scientific

2013 is off to a good start for Cadi Scientific, with strong customer demand continuing from last year. Building on the deployment of our solutions last year, we believe that Singapore, Thailand and China offer big opportunities for our infant safety, patient tracking and medical device interfacing solutions in the year ahead. We will also be exploring an interesting opportunity in South Korea. Overall, our greatest challenge in 2013 will be ensuring we appropriately allocate our financial and manpower resources to achieve fast yet sustainable growth.

Dr Gideon Ho, CEO, Histolindex

Histolindex made great strides in 2012, including receiving our first order from China and winning several industry awards in recognition of our innovative products and services. In 2013, we will be building on this strong momentum to achieve projected revenues of $6 million for the year. We aim to achieve this through a renewed focus on China, where we will open a representative office, and the opening of scanning and image analysis service centres in the US and Europe. As our technology continues to be validated and accepted in new markets, we will be working with our partners to extend our imaging platform beyond liver and kidney diseases to cervical and breast cancer.

Chan Chong Beng, President, Association of Small and Medium Enterprises

Going into 2013, we see the manpower crunch and rising cost of operations as the main challenges to the competitiveness and growth of SMEs. In 2012, the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises (ASME) extended its reach into the heartlands with the opening of the EDC@NorthEast, a collaboration between EDC@ASME and the North East Community Development Council to bring government assistance schemes and services closer to the neighbourhood shops and micro-enterprises in the North East District. Through EDC@NorthEast and other initiatives, ASME aims to help SMEs speed up productivity improvements and find alternative solutions to the issues they are facing.

Dr Michael Toh, Managing Director, Air Division

There is no doubt that 2012 was a tough year, with local and global economic concerns affecting our retail business. However, there were several bright spots, including some positive developments in our export markets. The winning of the world-renowned iF Product Design award, as well as several other initiatives we have in the pipeline, will help us engage our customers better and enhance our brand recall – two key areas of focus for Air Division in 2013. Internally, a focus on improving our productivity is a priority, and on the product front, we will continue to create great designs this year!
Having achieved steady growth for the past 10 years, Hydroemission Corporation is moving ahead with plans to expand its overseas footprint and improve its product offerings.

While green initiatives are often implemented by companies as part of their corporate social responsibility strategy, environmental solutions provider Hydroemission Corporation bases its entire business model on it.

Established in 2003 by Ms Grace Chew and her partner, Mr Paolo Nalin, Hydroemission developed a proprietary biodegradable polymer matrix for use in time-release ambient scents, waste treatment and indoor air quality control. For example, Hydroemission’s ambient scented products can be installed in air conditioners, where a scent embedded in the biodegradable matrix is slowly released before it degrades completely without any residue.

The company’s green approach has paid off since its commercialisation in 2007. Besides winning the Emerging Enterprise 2011 Best
Innovation Award, Hydroemission also clinched the SEC-Senoko Energy Green Innovation Award last year.

“Growth has been escalating and we expect a turnover of $1 million by March this year. The future looks exciting for our company as we plan to launch our own line of products under the Hydroemission brand name. Previously, our technology was marketed under our distributors’ brands,” explains Ms Chew.

Expanding its reach
Despite the uncertain economic outlook for 2013, Mr Nalin expects growth to remain steady. With plans to push ahead with market expansion into Brazil, China and Turkey this year, Mr Nalin says that investment in machinery to improve productivity and scale up its production capacity was necessary.

“We will need to multiply our capacity by at least 10 times to be able to cater to these new markets. By automating some of our labour-intensive processes, we will be able to produce more with the same number of staff,” adds Mr Nalin.

Besides automation, Hydroemission aims to apply for the Green Label certification for its products and make further inroads into controlling mosquito breeding by developing its own environmentally-friendly and cost-effective active ingredients this year.

Key takeaways
• Strong brand recognition can open the door to growth opportunities and attract investors.
• To find out how SPRING can support the development of new products and services, please visit www.spring.gov.sg/EnterpriseIndustry.
For more than 20 years, Hai’s has been producing sauces and pastes to flavour some of Singapore’s most beloved dishes, from laksa and curry chicken to mee rebus and mee siam. Despite its success over the years, 2012 was a challenging year for the company as rising costs and increasing competition squeezed profits.

“Singapore is a relatively small and very competitive market,” explains Mr Darren Lim, Hai’s General Manager. “Our costs are going up, but we have invested a lot into machinery and other areas of the business in 2012, and now we need to increase revenues to ensure that we continue to grow.”

To achieve this, the company will undertake several strategic initiatives, from developing new products to targeting new market segments and pushing into new regional markets.

**Innovation is key**

The introduction of new products and formats will be a key part of the changes at Hai’s. These include more convenient packaging concepts for today’s hectic lifestyles, as well as dipping sauces in glass jars – a new format for Hai’s. To drive innovation, the company is in discussions with SPRING Singapore for support to establish an R&D lab in Singapore.

“By developing new products, we can position ourselves to tap into new market segments. For example, our boxed products and dipping sauces will be positioned as premium items,” says Mr Lim.
Another segment which Mr Lim wants to expand is the outsourced production services that Hai’s offers to food companies and restaurants. “These tend to be higher-volume customers, so if we can build this part of our business, it will have a strong positive impact on revenues,” Mr Lim shares.

In tandem with new products and services, branding has also been identified as a key area of focus. Singapore’s competitive market means that a strong brand is critical to success, and Hai’s will be putting resources towards raising the profile of the company, both in Singapore and overseas.

**Expanding overseas**

Although Hai’s already sells in markets such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Australia, Brunei, Lebanon and Malaysia through distributors, 85 per cent of its revenue still comes from Singapore. “We have to step out of Singapore and into new export markets. This is where we will be able to grow volumes for our business,” says Mr Lim.

China has been identified as a key target market and Hai’s will be increasing its presence at trade fairs and exhibitions there, as well as in the region, to develop business leads and increase awareness of the company and its products.

“We want to continue to strengthen our presence in the local market, but at the same time push overseas from our strong local base. This will be critical if we want to hit our 20 per cent revenue growth target for 2013,” says Mr Lim.

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**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- Expanding your market by introducing new products and branching out overseas can help to boost revenues.
- To find out how SPRING Singapore can help you take the first step towards product innovation, visit www.spring.gov.sg/EnterpriseIndustry.
For an authentic Persian dining experience in Singapore, there is only one place to go: Shiraz. Mr Abi Bagheri (right), the Shiraz F&B Group’s Managing Director and Co-founder, stresses that Shiraz is not just about the food, but a complete experience, from the décor to the open kitchen, charcoal grill and belly-dancing performances.

This has proved to be a successful formula, as Shiraz has grown from a single restaurant at Clarke Quay in 2006 to include three Mazzeh kiosks and a Lazziz Bistro & Bar with a total turnover of $8 million in 2012. More outlets are planned for this year, and Bagheri believes Shiraz will soon be ready to branch out regionally through franchising.

Laying the foundation for growth
To get to this stage, Shiraz has been focusing on building up its capabilities and capacity in a number of areas. With support from SPRiNG, Shiraz set up a new central kitchen at Jurong Food Hub six months ago. "The new kitchen allows for better quality control, efficiency and cost management by reducing wastage and automating the cooking and preparation processes. It also has the capacity to service up to 20 Mazzeh kiosks, so there is room for expansion," says Bagheri.

Upgrades to the back-end IT systems have also been done with expansion in mind. "When we sign a franchising agreement, we have to be able to connect the franchisee’s point of sale system to our back-end reporting and purchasing system. So we need to prepare these things now. Besides, these are good investments for improving our operations," he explains.

Taking the next steps
While Bagheri prefers to keep any new Singapore outlets in-house, he believes that franchising is the way to go for regional growth, particularly for the Mazzeh kiosks. With SPRiNG’s support, Shiraz has been working with consultants to prepare standard operating procedures and a franchising framework. "When we opened the Mazzeh in front of Ngee Ann City, a lot of people saw it and we immediately started getting inquiries about franchising from around the region. We will be ready to go with this soon," he says.

He adds, "2013 will still be about building the base in Singapore, so that we’ll be ready to grow. But if the right partners come along, we could have franchises set up within this year. However, we’re not in a rush and we will wait for the right partner and the right place."

Another important aspect of the company’s growth is positioning it to attract investors in the future. To date, the business has grown purely organically, but to take things to the next level – which the group intends to do – Bagheri believes that external funding will be needed. "In the long term, there could be five to 10 Shiraz restaurants around the world, plus Mazzeh kiosks around the region. We could be the first global Persian restaurant!"

Key Takeaways
- A solid foundation from which to grow is critical to the success of any company looking to expand its operations.
- Find out how SPRiNG Singapore can help you lay the foundations for growth at www.spring.gov.sg/EnterpriseIndustry.
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Going overseas and don’t know where to eat? Look no further than Burpple, an app that helps users tap into a community of food lovers around the world who are sharing their local food experiences.

Established at the end of 2011 by Mr Elisha Ong, Mr Dixon Chan and Mr Daniel Hum, Burpple is a fast-growing start-up that aims to build a trusted community for sharing and discovering local food experiences by posting pictures and reviews and joining discussions. It was launched in May 2012 with the support of the YES! Start-ups Grant (now replaced by the ACE Start-ups Grant), and already has users in more than 115 countries, with more than 200,000 posts from over 3,300 cities.

These impressive achievements have come in a short time span, and have helped Burpple to attract some valuable attention from venture capital investors. An injection of US$500,000 by a group of investors in December has propelled Burpple to the next level.

A welcome surprise
“The way we got our funding was quite unique. We didn’t really pitch for it; we just happened to meet the right people at the right time. In fact, we were approached by Mr James Chan of Neoteny Labs, who led the funding round, and then we decided it was the right investors and the right time. The National Research Foundation and QuestVC, led by Mr James Tan, also participated in the round,” explains Mr Ong.

The funding capped a busy year that included the launch of Chinese and Japanese versions of the app, the introduction of posting via Instagram, and the expansion of the team to seven full-time staff plus an intern.

Mr Ong says that amidst rapid growth, the company has evolved from a ‘chaotic’ start-up into a company with more clarity of vision and direction. “2013 will be about acting on this clarity, both in terms of product and team direction. We hope to see greater efficiency as we roll out a product that is used by people around the world,” says Mr Ong.

Among the plans for 2013 are putting the app on new platforms like Android, and offering a web-based version as well.

Engaging the community
With a growing community of users, one of Burpple’s areas of focus for the year will be to create deeper engagement with them. To achieve this, it will continue to feature users on the company’s blog, as well as kick off a series of Burpple Meetups that will bring together users who want to share their thoughts on food and more.

“It’s about being involved in the community, with the people who travel and eat and love to discover new places and new foods. We’re growing the community by focusing on people,” shares Mr Ong.

He adds, “What started as an idea for a food journal – sharing pictures of what you’re eating and what your friends are eating – has evolved, based on our observation and input from users. We talk to our users to get their feedback and also do a lot of groundwork, like travelling to new places and being users ourselves.”

SHARING FOR FOODIES

Burpple is bringing local food experiences to a global audience.

“Burpple Meetups will bring together users who love to discover new places and new foods. We’re growing the community by focusing on people.”

Mr Elisha Ong

KEY TAKEAWAYS
- Reaching out to end-users to gather input when developing a product or service will ensure that it meets their needs.
- To explore funding options available to start-ups in Singapore through the Action Community for Entrepreneurship, visit www.ace.sg.
Mr Prakash Somosundram, Chair of the ACE Communications Subcommittee, speaks to SPRINGnews in the final instalment of a seven-part Q&A series with the Action Community for Entrepreneurship (ACE).

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

**SPRINGnews**: What were some of the key initiatives undertaken in 2012 to raise awareness of ACE and entrepreneurship in Singapore?

**Mr Somosundram**: 2012 was a year when we laid the foundation for the future. We began our foray into social media, establishing our presence on platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. Another initiative was the ACE Starter Kit, an online collection of discounts and free subscriptions for start-up related products and services.

To support more entrepreneurship-related events, we set up the Feed the Founders Programme, which encourages start-up networking events by providing the social lubricant – the all-important food and drinks. The new ACE Booster Pack is a bag full of goodies and toiletries to give start-ups a morale boost for the long hours that they have to put in.

**SPRINGnews**: What has the response been to these efforts?

**Mr Somosundram**: I think ACE’s profile as a friend and supporter of entrepreneurs in Singapore has grown. By engaging the entrepreneurship community, we have gained greater insights into the challenges entrepreneurs are facing. This allows us to further develop our online platforms so that we can go beyond the traditional model of supporting events to one where support is available anywhere and anytime.

**SPRINGnews**: What is in the pipeline for the Communications Subcommittee in 2013?

**Mr Somosundram**: Building on the momentum in 2012, we are developing a new initiative called ACE Conversations. This will be an engaging series of interactions with start-ups to look at how they can contribute to a more vibrant start-up community in Singapore.

**SPRINGnews**: 2013 marks the 10th year since ACE was set up. How do you plan to celebrate ACE’s 10th anniversary?

**Mr Somosundram**: This will definitely be an exciting year, both for ACE and for me. I started as a participant in the early years and moved on to contribute as an EXCO member. Ten years is an amazing milestone and I am proud to say that ACE has played a key role in shaping the dynamic entrepreneurship ecosystem we have today. We are planning a month of entrepreneurship events to mark the anniversary.

We are also working towards launching ACE’s new branding in conjunction with this key milestone. While we will retain the heritage and brand equity of ACE, we also want to add more dynamism to depict the new direction that ACE will be heading towards in the next 10 years and beyond.

**SPRINGnews**: What are your wishes for ACE and Singapore’s start-up scene over the next 10 years, and how can they be realised?

**Mr Somosundram**: My wish is for ACE to continue working closely with Singapore’s entrepreneurs, to serve them in the best way possible. To achieve this, we need to have both the private and public sectors striving towards the common goal of building and sustaining a vibrant, exciting entrepreneurial community in Singapore.

ACE’s profile as a friend and supporter of entrepreneurs in Singapore has grown. By engaging the entrepreneurship community, we have gained greater insights into the challenges entrepreneurs are facing.”

Mr Prakash Somosundram
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The Change Agent Competition aims to transform graduates’ perceptions of working for SMEs by highlighting the exciting opportunities they offer.
With the bulk of fresh graduates making a beeline for jobs at brand-name multinational companies, SMEs face an uphill battle to bring in the young talent needed to grow their businesses.

Recognising this challenge, SPRiNG Singapore organised The Change Agent competition in partnership with the Business Leaders Alumni Club (BLAC), with the objective of exposing local university undergraduates to the opportunities of an SME work environment.

The competition involved teams of students carrying out tasks assigned to them by three SMEs – Scanteak, HSL Constructor Pte Ltd and Mr Bean. Staff from the three SMEs also acted as coaches and mentors for the students. Projects included designing a social media campaign, conducting a customer survey, and reviewing the company’s operational strategy. The final challenge saw the teams face off in creating a business proposal for Winson Press Pte Ltd’s customised self-publishing platform, myplog.co.

According to BLAC’s chairman, Ms Susan Chong, the objective of the competition is to show that SMEs are good employers who can offer fresh graduates exciting career and learning opportunities.

“The companies that were chosen as judges and mentors for the competition are household names, because we want to convey the message that there are many outstanding SMEs that can offer graduates a bright and dynamic future,” says Ms Chong.

Better development opportunities

Mr Tan Jit Khoon, Chief Executive Officer of Winson Press Pte Ltd, believes that clearly defined development opportunities can attract graduates who are deciding between working for an SME or MNC.

“MNCs, being multi-layered in most cases, present a very focused environment for newly minted professionals. This results in graduates getting a narrow perspective on the career options they might have. What an SME can offer is a holistic view of the career development options that are available to them,” says Mr Tan, who was also a judge for the competition.

He adds: “Most importantly, given the dynamic nature of SMEs, every member of the team plays a crucial role and is empowered to make things happen.”

In fact, one team had the opportunity to execute their business plan right after the competition. Movement12, a concept developed by Nanyang Technological University undergraduates Zhou Mi and Elvin Zhang, was adopted by Winson Press Pte Ltd to launch myplog.co in December 2012. The campaign aims to encourage Singaporeans to live their life with passion and to share what is important to them on social media platforms.

“Nothing feels better than getting acknowledged for your efforts. I believe that the best things an SME can do for graduates is to provide support to bring their ideas to life,” says Mr Tan.

Benefits to SMEs

While the focus of the competition was on the benefits and opportunities that graduates can gain by working for an SME, it is also important for SMEs to understand the value of bringing in fresh talent. By doing so, they get access to a trained workforce that can quickly help them to meet the demands of a rapidly changing business environment.

“Young graduates are a source of inspiration for SMEs. They also help businesses to stay up to date with their perspectives on technological developments and their spirit to challenge the status quo and drive change,” explains Mr Tan.

BLAC hopes to extend The Change Agent competition to polytechnic students. It also plans to offer scholarships and internship opportunities to develop future business leaders.

“We will organise this competition again because it is in line with BLAC’s mission to develop future business leaders. We believe it is a good way for SMEs to build up a talent pipeline,” says Ms Chong.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- Engaging students while they are still in school will give SMEs a head start in recruiting and developing the future leaders of their company.
- For more information on The Change Agent competition, please visit www.changeagent.com.sg.
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