Co-Creating Value in a Retail Market Setting

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It is usually assumed that the co-creation of value requires a close relationship between producers and customers. Typically, this is easier in a business-to-business context, where the numbers of customers and suppliers are relatively low and the capabilities and needs of each partner can readily be assessed. On the other hand, it could be assumed that the co-creation of value in a business-to-consumer context is likely to be more difficult, given the larger numbers of customers and more frequent, short-term, discrete transactions. This article investigates whether it is possible to co-create valuable consumer experiences in a mass market setting by examining the customer relationship strategies of eight Norwegian seafood retailers. The results show that considerable effort from both retailers and consumers are devoted to co-create valuable consumer experiences. We also reveal a repertoire of strategies to engage customers in the co-creation process. Findings are discussed and implications highlighted.

KEYWORDS Co-creation of value, innovation, interaction, customer relationships

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INTRODUCTION

It is axiomatic that excellent firm performance depends on satisfied customers. It follows, then, that firms that operate in competitive markets should strive to produce superior product and service value to retain customers and to stop competitors from luring customers away. Constant innovation becomes necessary to ensure that firms design, produce, and deliver goods and services that offer improved benefits to target segments. However, most of the innovation literature focuses on how to improve core product benefits, rather than augmented product benefits such as consumption experiences. Empirical research into how firms and customers can work together to co-create these experiences is also lacking.

In theory, the co-creation of value requires a close relationship between producers and customers. This should be easier in a business-to-business context, where the numbers of customers and suppliers are relatively low and the capabilities and needs of each partner can readily be assessed. Conversely, co-creation is likely to be more difficult in business-to-consumer markets, where there are larger numbers of customers, more frequent transactions and shorter interactions.

This article investigates whether it is possible to co-create valuable consumer experiences in a mass market setting. An exploratory approach is used to investigate the customer relationship strategies of eight Norwegian seafood retailers. The results have important implications for innovation theory and practice. What follows is a discussion of the relevant literature, the research questions and methodology used to explore these questions, followed by analysis of the results, conclusions, and implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been argued that customers value positive experiences most (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). In fact, all products involve consumption experiences (Holbrook, 2000), as the product “is no more than an artifact around which customers have experiences” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000, p. 83). Goods, or tangible products (as opposed to service products), have also been conceptualised as ways of delivering services (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). People do not buy pieces of raw seafood, for example. Instead, they buy the services needed to help create enjoyable cooking and eating experiences. Experiences also go beyond core benefits, and include the well-being that flows from eating nutritious food and other hedonic aspects of consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), such as the enjoyment one might get from preparing a special seafood meal and sharing it with friends.

Many consumers appear to gain satisfaction from taking an active part in the creation of value (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993; Prahalad & Ramaswamy,
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2004; Toffler, 1980). Co-creating experiences with consumers, then, may also provide firms with a source of competitive advantage (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). However, consumers may differ in their motivations and expectations, with some reluctant to take an active role in the co-creation of value, whereas others may demand this.

The creation of desired experiences may also require specific knowledge and skills. The capabilities needed to make a memorable meal, for example, may relate to storing, preparing and cooking ingredients, and to arranging, garnishing, and presenting the main course and complementary dishes in an appealing manner. The things that customers or consumers do not do well (or do not do at all) represent opportunities for firms to offer solutions (Ramirez, 1999). In order to offer advice or expertise, however, firms first need to find out what consumption experiences people want, as well as the abilities of both partners (i.e., the firm and customers) to help co-create those experiences. Because the requisite knowledge may be tacit and the learning process may be long and/or difficult to master, meaningful interaction and dialogue between partners is vital.

In the relationship marketing and management literatures the benefits of mutual learning and innovation have long been promised (e.g., Gulati, Nohria, & Zaheer, 2000; Selnes & Sallis, 2003). Von Hippel (1986) has also demonstrated how interactions with “lead users” may result in novel and valuable product concepts. It has been assumed, though, that mutual learning can only take place in the context of long-term relationships. This is because it can take time for partners to become acquainted and understand each other (Lane & Lubatkin, 1998) and to establish mutual trust.

Much of the previous research into the learning and innovation benefits that can accrue from relationships has been conducted in the business-to-business context. Although some studies have investigated consumer involvement in new service development (e.g., Matthing, Sanden, & Edvardsson, 2004), more research is required to understand how firms and customers can co-create valuable consumption experiences (Wilkstrom, 1996), particularly in mass market, business-to-consumer settings.

This raises some important research questions which this study hopes to address. The central question relates to how firms and customers (who may also be end consumers) can co-create value in a mass market characterized by frequent, short-term interactions. In retailing, for example, front line staff typically spends little time with each customer during a transaction. This makes it difficult to get to know customers, their levels of knowledge and skills, and their expectations and motivations concerning the co-creation of value. It also makes it difficult to devise customer relationship strategies that will encourage customers to become more engaged in the co-creation of product or service innovations and/or consumption experiences. This raises several subsidiary research questions that relate to which customers...
staff should pay most attention to, how to enable meaningful interactions and dialogue, and how to motivate customers to become more actively involved in the co-creation process.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

Due to modest a priori insights, an exploratory approach was taken to address the research questions. In-depth case studies of eight Norwegian seafood retailers were undertaken to investigate their customer relationship strategies. Fishmongers were considered appropriate subjects because they operate in a typical mass market setting where co-creation research is lacking. It should be noted that our aim is not to generalize our findings, however a small-scale study was considered a useful first step to building co-creation theory in this food retailing context.

The selection of the eight fishmongers included in the study was partly based on convenience sampling, as there exist relatively few fishmongers (there are typically only one or two fishmongers in small-to medium-sized towns). Thus, most fishmongers in four Norwegian towns were selected. In addition, we also included three seafood counters in food retail stores. One of these was selected because it is the only one in Norway where staff interacts with customers *in front* of the counter rather than over the counter. Background information about the fishmongers and seafood counters is shown in Appendix 1.

The fishmongers/seafood counters predominantly sell fresh seafood, but also offer salted, dried, and smoked seafood, as well as some pre-cooked hot and cold dishes. They often prepare fish, which they buy from various wholesalers, by making cuts and fillets.

In addition to personal observation and inspection of secondary data sources such as public accounting information and articles in local newspapers and the trade press, we also conducted interviews with managers or key staff. Depth interviews were used to explore how the firms interact with their customers to co-create valuable consumer experiences. The interviews were conducted as conversations, with managers playing an active role and the interviewer following up with probing questions to get a deeper understanding. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and content analysed.

The first interviews provided a great deal of new insight into the problem area. Gradually, as new companies were included in the study, fewer new conditions (e.g., ways of engaging consumers in co-creation) were discovered. When we had included eight companies, we reached a point where new interviews gave little new insights into our research questions. In line with recommendations by Eisenhardt (1989), we concluded the study.
The texts were carefully read to identify the variation in strategies used to manage customer relationships and to co-create value. Excerpts from the interviews are reported to allow the readers to assess our interpretations and conclusions (cf. Kirk & Miller, 1986).

FINDINGS

Our observations and interviews indicated that F1 tries to engage customers in the co-creation of value only to a limited degree. Rather, F1 seems to follow a more product-oriented approach, where value is realized when the purchase is paid for (cf. Ramirez, 1999). The manager told us:

*We think it is enough to sell good quality products. (F1).*

It should be noted that F1 has a positive reputation and enjoys an extremely favorable location in the largest mall in town. F1 achieves good profits, and the manager appears content with the situation.

However, the other firms and seafood counters try to co-create valuable experiences with customers. Therefore, in the following discussion we focus on these firms. We begin by reporting how the firms and their customers interact, how consumer experiences are co-created, and how customers are educated and motivated to engage in this activity.

The nature of interactions

Given the high frequency of interactions between staff and customers it could be questioned whether it is possible to co-create valuable consumption experiences. A key question is whether there is time for meaningful interactions and dialogue to take place. Our results indicate that this is possible to some extent and that staff and customers employ specific strategies to facilitate this.

Interactions vary considerably from very short requests for specific seafood products to lengthy interactions when customers ask for advice about preparation and cooking. The deeper interactions occur when customers are uncertain about what to cook or when they want advice about how to make a special dish.

The fishmongers have large numbers of customers. Even F2, the smallest fishmonger in our study, has up to 1,700 customers a week. About 50% of the weekly customers do their shopping on Fridays or Saturdays (the stores are closed on Sundays). On busy days there are often queues of customers waiting to be served. The stress involved with waiting could affect customer satisfaction and shorten interactions with retail staff. However, most of the fishmongers have developed a novel way of dealing with the situation. The
staff often engage in conversation with the first person in the queue about what they intend to cook, because they have noticed that other waiting customers are often interested in the ensuing dialogue.

*Often we take our time with the first customer about what and how to cook a dish. Then the next customer wants the same. We often experience this. In a shop like this there is no use being reticent—we must talk so that people can hear us—it’s a bit of entertainment for the customers, which also shortens their time waiting (F2).*

This indicates that several customers can be given new ideas and inspired simultaneously, and that potential negative effects due to waiting (cf. Taylor & Claxton, 1994) can be reduced by providing entertaining advice.

Although fewer staff are employed on quiet days, they can spend more time with each customer. It is also easier to identify and target lead customers.

*They [the food lovers] have time . . . and they really enjoy shopping. They may buy 300 grams of one sort [of seafood product] and put together menus. And then we like it, behind the counter, as well (F2).*

These lead consumers are more knowledgeable and skilled, and more motivated to help firms to innovate (von Hippel, 1986).

Because customers’ seafood knowledge and preparation skills vary, it can be difficult for retail staff to identify customer needs and to solve these co-operatively. Those customers who are less interested in co-creating value (e.g., those who are not particularly interested in novel eating experiences) also tend to withdraw from deeper engagement with staff.

*We are discussing food, and those that only eat to get filled do not talk much about food. But those that eat for the experience and social aspects surrounding food are the people we connect with and those that we talk the most with. These are the people that have a good time and enjoy shopping. They provide clear speech –there is no need for translation (F2).*

Although all firms except F1 emphasise interaction with customers, no one is as innovative as F5. This is a seafood counter within an up-market food retail store, which has removed some of the barriers between customers and retail staff by positioning staff in front of the display counter rather than behind it. Customers and staff interact more easily when purchasers point out what products they would like to buy, and standing next to each other makes dialogue more natural. Staff and customers are also encouraged to share their knowledge and expertise.
Co-creating experiences

Although customers are often happy to buy tangible goods such as fresh cod fillets or salmon steaks in discrete transactions, a strong emphasis in improving their relationships with customers to help them to create valuable experiences was revealed. With the exception of F1 all fishmongers and fish counters expressed this in different ways. For example, the manager of F2 told us:

> They [the customers] are not here to buy an isolated fish product, but rather a complete recipe for certain meal occasions, which includes all the trimmings, preparations, recommendations of wine, and even sometimes how to lay and garnish the table. Thus we are not only producing and selling seafood, but rather we, to an increasing degree, produce and sell food experiences.

This implies adoption of an experience-based perspective of their offering (cf. Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Interestingly, in many of our interviews we were told that the majority of customers do not know exactly what they want when they walk into the store. Clearly, this indecisiveness represents an opportunity for both customers and staff to engage in the co-creation of consumption experiences (cf. Ramirez, 1999).

What to cook for dinner, though, may not be easy to resolve. Customers differ in their preferences and cooking skills, and the extent to which they are interested in asking for advice. This indicates that staff need good customer knowledge to help define the meal problem better and to work out ways of solving it. It must also be remembered that there is unlikely to be a standard solution for any particular problem or query.

The manager of F2 told us that fishermen are often the most difficult customers to deal with because they claim to have good product knowledge and consider that they do not to need any meal preparation advice. Typically, they claim that: “We know this [how to prepare fish], because we have been fishing for 30 years.” Obviously frustrated, the manager told us: “I keep my mouth shut, but these are the people that have destroyed the most value.” This indicates that a careful approach is needed to avoid offending those customers who want to devise their own solutions. The manager of F2 explained: “Each one must be interpreted in terms of how much help they want.”

To assist those who do want help, though, a probing approach is applied. Typical questions might be “Do you want to fry, boil, bake, or wok?” “Do you want to prepare something fast, or do you want to spend time on this?” “Are you having guests?” In this way, staff try to reveal customer preferences, expectations, and cooking skills, and to engage customers in dialogue so food experiences can be co-created. It should be noted that both parties need to contribute information for co-creation to take place.
An interesting observation is that some fishmongers offer ready-made meals such as bacalao and fish au gratin, as well as selling the base ingredients for making these dishes. This may seem paradoxical if firms are genuinely interested in co-creating experiences with customers. However, it appears that consumer choice is paramount.

*I think that it is very important that we can offer both [i.e., the ready meal and base ingredients]. We must cover a wide spectre of products so that people can choose what they want (F2).*

This indicates that the manager is aware of heterogeneous preferences among consumers and that a broad continuum of meal co-creation opportunities needs to be catered for.

Engaging, educating, and motivating customers

As indicated at the outset of the paper, substantial skills and knowledge are required to create valuable seafood consumption experiences. This goes for both consumers and staff as argued by the managers of F4:

*A lot of people [customers] are knowledgeable about food in general. This puts strong demands on us who ideally should know a bit more. And we do most of the time, but not always—then we listen to the customer and ties to come up with small tips.*

However, some customers may lack the motivation, as well as the capabilities, to explore new opportunities. For fishmongers, who to an increasing extent offer “food experiences,” these less motivated customers represent an opportunity. Our investigations reveal that a range of strategies are used to tempt and persuade customers to create extra value at home.

First of all, a strong need to educate customers about how to transport, store, prepare and cook seafood was expressed by most subjects. This reflects an understanding that more competent consumers are able to create more valuable experiences. An important point in this respect is that fresh seafood is highly perishable and will deteriorate quickly if it is not transported and stored correctly. F2’s manager told us:

*It gives me stomach ache when I see people sitting in the café [located next door] with a bag of fresh fish or prawns on the floor. If you place 300 grams of fresh fillet on a floor that keeps 20°c [degrees centigrade] the fish deteriorates pretty fast.*

To reduce this problem the staff ask regular customers they know are going to the café to let them keep the fish cooled behind the counter while the
customers have a coffee. “Then I know they will arrive home with a good product” (F2). Also, if people buy both heated and chilled seafood they are instructed to keep the bags separate. F2’s manager pointed out: “This is just to illustrate some of the problems one is struggling with when one wants the consumer to get the full value of their products.”

Educating consumers about seafood is emphasised in the dialogue, but knowledge is enhanced in several other ways. For example, the fishmongers have racks near their counters with colourful and vivid leaflets with tempting recipes and information about different fish species. In a similar way, F5 has a touch screen PC where customers can get ideas and find recipes.

According to F3’s manager, the “seafood counter should seduce the customers. The visual sensation is crucial for their selection.” Another way to tempt customers is through free samples for immediate tasting. Consumers are encouraged to give feedback on the products they try. While this is an opportunity to attract attention and tempt customers to try out new or existing offers, it is also a way of involving customers in interaction and dialogue. The manager of F4 told us this:

*This [free samples] is something we do with regular customers—and those who dare say their opinion—so that we get useful feedback.*

F3 and F4 also have lunch bars to serve various dishes that are based on the ingredients offered in the seafood counter. F3’s manager stated:

*The effect of the lunch bar goes far beyond filling peoples stomachs. It gives us an excellent opportunity to present our selection of seafood products. It puts us in a dialogue with the customer and we get direct feedback concerning preparations and taste. Without being insistent, the lunch bar is a suitable place for recommendations and it is our impression that this is highly appreciated by customers.*

The manager claims that the lunch bar has become so popular that it now represents 15–20 percent of the total turnover for the fishmonger.

F3 has invested in a further strategy to engage, educate and motivate its customers to co-create experiential value. It owns a show kitchen facility where seminars on seafood and cooking are held two or three times a week. The show kitchen is connected to a conference room with space for 40 people. A range of organisations hold meetings in the conference room and after this they get a presentation about the fishmonger and its activities. After this, a chef prepares a range of dishes in the show kitchen for immediate tasting. Members of the audience are often invited to participate in the cooking, too.

The manager takes an active role in these events, which also provide an opportunity to co-create new food products.
The people who participate on these courses and events usually have a genuine interest in food experiences. They like to talk about food and they all have some food experiences they are proud of. When they tell about them we get inspiration and learn about their finesse. Thus, we get a broad spectrum of different recipes with distinct tastes. In addition, we develop relationships with these people and learn about their cooking skills. Some of them have very good skills and these people we try to use actively in new product development. For instance, if we will try to make a fish cake with herbs, we try to involve the customers who we know have good knowledge of herbs. We give them samples of the fish cakes and ask them to evaluate them and suggest how we can improve or modify them in different ways. Therefore you might say that these customers play both an important and active role when we develop new products (F3).

DISCUSSION

This article addresses the important, but largely neglected, question of whether and how firms operating in a mass, retail market, characterised by numerous discrete transactions, can co-create valuable experiences with customers. Contrary to what might be assumed, it appears that useful interactions and dialogue between front line staff and customers are possible and may be given high priority by both partners in a mass, retail market setting that is typified by many short, discrete transactions. Our findings reveal that it is still possible for front-line staff to assess the preferences, motivations, knowledge, and skills of individual customers that may impact on the co-creation of consumption experiences. Staff can then tailor the sort of assistance they provide. Likewise, customers can get to know retail staff and the kind of advice they are able to offer.

Further, retailers are able to identify and target lead consumers—food lovers, in this instance—who are willing to help firms to innovate, as well as to promote store image through positive word of mouth communications about their retail interaction and food preparation and consumption experiences. One firm, F3, went to great lengths to involve customers in the co-creation of value by hosting interactive seminars and cooking demonstrations.

It is also possible for retailers to identify those who are most reluctant to engage in meaningful interactions and to avoid annoying them. Because preferences for co-creation appear to be on a continuum, though, some customers who are not currently motivated may not be quite so negative in their views and may provide firms with an opportunity to encourage deeper dialogue. One way is to educate customers, through the provision of recipes and other information, samples, ready-prepared meals and cooking demonstrations. Another way to encourage engagement is to break down physical and associated perceptual barriers, by placing staff alongside customers in
front of the counter, for example, to help facilitate more natural interactions and dialogue.

Entertainment may also facilitate interactions and encourage value co-creation. Seminars and cooking demonstrations could again play important roles, as could a simpler solution used by F2. The latter involved trying to entertain and inspire several customers simultaneously by taking more time with the first people in a queue and actively helping them to solve a meal problem. This would inevitably be overheard by other waiting customers who would also become interested in both the problem and the solution. In addition, it helped reduce negative effects on satisfaction caused by waiting (Taylor & Claxton, 1994). This strategy to cope with peak load, alongside rostering more staff, is novel and seems highly suitable when there are a large number of indecisive customers waiting to be served.

Of course, some retailers may question whether they would benefit financially from investing greater resources in encouraging customers to engage in the co-creation of consumption experiences and the development of new product and service innovations. It is evident that two of the fishmongers and seafood counters we studied have benefited from their co-creation strategies through higher levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty. However, a more puzzling finding is that the firm (F1) that is more product-oriented and less interested in innovation, is at least as profitable as the other fishmongers. Whereas some try hard to motivate and engage consumers to co-create valuable experiences, F1 seems to follow a more traditional goods-based approach where value creation is perceived to end with the sales transaction. How can this be explained? First, it indicates that different business logics can be successful in the same market (cf. Day, 2004). This is an example of equifinality, i.e., different arrangements may be used to succeed in the same market (Gresov & Drazin, 1997). However, different business models may require different resources and competencies. Closer inspection of the findings shows that perceiving products as experiences and interacting with consumers requires attention, time, knowledge, and competencies that compensate other firms for the location disadvantages they face when compared to F1.

A related issue is whether the two business logics will prevail in a market where consumers, to an increasing extent, value service and consumption experiences and the co-creation of value (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In fact, the question arises as to whether F1 has become trapped by its competence in delivering high quality products (cf. Argyris, 1991) and thus might not see the increased demand for experiences and the totally different business logic demonstrated by the other fishmongers we studied. In fact, it could be argued that the managers of these firms have developed a superior theoretical understanding of how to facilitate and co-create consumption experiences and other product and service innovations. Interestingly, their theoretical understanding appears to be ahead of
many modern textbooks in areas such as new product development and marketing management.

Our findings reveal some interesting insights regarding the co-creation of value in a retail market setting. However, findings and conclusions must be evaluated in light of study limitations. First, our study is based on a small sample of firms within one specific retail setting. This limits the generalisability of our findings and conclusions, i.e., that the extent to which conclusions are valid for other seafood retailers or other types of mass markets should be questioned. However, we believe that our findings have theoretical validity, implying that in a mass market such as that studied here it is possible for retailers to facilitate meaningful interactions and dialogue and to incorporate customers in innovation activities.

A second limitation is that our study is based on examination of one side of the dyad only, i.e., the company side. This is a weakness in that the perceptions of the retailers regarding the nature of interactions and co-creation activities with consumers might not be shared by consumers. By studying one side of the dyad only we also miss out on possible insights that could have been revealed by including consumers, e.g., regarding how they perceive the co-creating interactions and associated benefits.

More research is definitely needed. In future studies a wider range of retail-customer relationships should be investigated. It is also highly relevant to investigate co-creation by including both sides of the dyad. Finally, research should be conducted in other market settings to assess whether the insights into value co-creation revealed in this study are context specific, or whether similar strategies and implementation processes could be applicable in other industries and whether similar benefits could result from them.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX 1. Some key characteristics of the firms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Informant</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F1</td>
<td>F1 has a long history. It employs five staff and in 2004 had a turnover of NOK 17 million. It is favourably located in a large shopping mall situated away from the centre of a small city of 60,000 people. It enjoys a very high level of passing shoppers.</td>
<td>General manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F2</td>
<td>F2 is a relatively new firm. It has four employees and has been growing steadily since it began trading in 2000. Its turnover in 2004 was NOK 8 million. Located favourably in a large shopping mall situated away from the centre of a small city of 60,000 people.</td>
<td>General manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F3</td>
<td>Free-standing fishmonger in the centre of a town with 30,000 inhabitants. The store has recently been redecorated and now includes a lunch bar where hot and cold seafood dishes are sold. F3 also sells non seafood ingredients such as herbs and cooking oils, but predominantly sells hot and cold seafood ingredients which customers use to make seafood meals. F3 has 27 staff and its turnover in 2004 was NOK 47 million. F3 recently celebrated its 80th anniversary.</td>
<td>General manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F4</td>
<td>Free-standing fishmonger in the centre of a town with 150,000 inhabitants. F4 also includes a lunch bar where hot and cold seafood dishes are sold. F4 also sells non seafood ingredients.</td>
<td>General manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F5</td>
<td>F5 is a fresh seafood counter inside a food retail store, which is part of a regional food retailer with 11 stores. The chain can be characterised as up-market with an emphasis on high quality and fresh food including seafood. F5 has removed some of the barriers between customers and retail staff by positioning staff in front of the display counter rather than behind it.</td>
<td>Store manager, fresh food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F6</td>
<td>F6 is a fresh seafood counter inside a food retail store which is part of the same retail chain as F5.</td>
<td>Store manager, fresh food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F7</td>
<td>F7 is a fresh seafood counter inside a food retail store which is part of one of the largest food retail chains in Norway.</td>
<td>Sales staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F8</td>
<td>F8 is a traditional fishmonger in the centre of a town with about 235,000 inhabitants. The fishmonger has 9 staff.</td>
<td>General manager</td>
</tr>
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</table>