25 BEST PRACTICES

IN BANNER ADVERTISING

About BannerSnack.com

BannerSnack aims to give people the opportunity to create better and more professional banner ads the easy way.

Since its launch in 2008, BannerSnack introduced one of the most versatile flash banner creation tools in the world, an application that is now used by more than 150.000 people around the globe, including designers, freelancers, copywriters and advertising creatives.

This short ebook serves the same scope of enabling people advertise better, more effectively and more professionally. We hope you'll enjoy it!

About the authors

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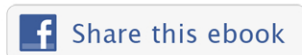
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25 BEST PRACTICES IN BANNER ADVERTISING

The truth about banner ads is that they're annoying, boring and they often speak a different language.

Well, a big part of them. Hundreds of ads blink, flash and use strong colors to drive attention, while some (pop-ups, expandable banners) have the nerve to cover what the users are reading.

Another truth about advertising is that it gives users the opportunity to read tons of great content for free by supporting the publisher. And the fact is – while banner advertising is getting more and more sophisticated - some well defined rules and standards are arising.

Needless to say that now there's more respect for the Internet users than ever.

Even though 2010 is the year of social media revolution and its importance is growing in the marketing strategy of the companies, you still might need to advertise your organization or product in the classical way, using banners.

Through social media you can create relationships and connect directly with your customers, while with banner advertising you can achieve both increased sales and brand awareness.

Spend your budget wisely and, using your creativity, build some ads that create impact - not like the ones mentioned in the first lines. This is a short book that can help you create more relevant banner ads, starting with creating a concept and ending with measuring the results.

Enjoy!

Copywriting

The process of creating great display ads starts by crafting a powerful message.
Copywriting is an essential part of what banner advertising means, and in some cases it's the most important one.

A good design empowers the message and draws attention, but the words you put in there define the message.

1. Answer the questions "What is my goal?"

You may offer a discount, introduce a new product to the market, let people know about your product's improved features and so on. Whatever your ad is about, there are two possible reasons for you to run it: to create brand awareness and to sell.

Selling your product and promoting your brand usually come along together, however some ads can have a focus on making the sale, whereas others tend to focus on promoting the brand.

2. Target

Have you ever heard the saying "if you're speaking to everybody, you're speaking to nobody"?
Same thing with banner advertising. It happens because the Internet, as any other medium, is crowded
with advertising messages that try to grab users' attention. So the users react by just ignoring most -
if not all - of these messages.

They will listen to what you've got to say only when they want to and only if your message resonates with
their way of seeing the world. So try selling to people who are more likely
to listen to you, **when** they are ready to listen.
Start by learning more about your possible prospects, about their interests and needs. If your product
can be used by different groups of people, create a different marketing message for each group.

3. Put yourself in their shoes

You have developed a service or product for a specific group of customers, to solve a problem they have or make their life easier. They would probably be much more open to hear about your product if you speak about it using their words. It may be difficult not to use technical words that you and your team use when talking about it. But in your prospects' eyes these tech words might be only confusing terms that they do not understand properly (sure, if you advertise to geeks and tech savvy people, on the opposite, you have to use jargon!).

So let's say you want to reach a regular audience, but you created an ad full of specs and jargon. Imagine those few moments your prospects notice such an ad. What would they find? Some tech lingo they do not understand (they wouldn't admit it however). What would they think? Well, probably they'll ignore your ad and move on. After all, it wasn't targeted at them, but at you. So even though you, as an expert in your field, understand your product perfectly and know every feature it has, your ad shouldn't sound so that it pleases you. Instead it should "please" your audience.

4. Be brief

We don't want to start a long copy vs. short copy debate. By being "brief" we mean that you should avoid wordiness and any unnecessary information in your ads (this is particularly true for banners). Blather bores the ever-hurried Internet users and it hardly can make a sale.

We know your product is great and it has all these cool features, but remember that users will grant you very few moments to read your ad. So choose your words carefully and shape up a simple and coherent message.

For instance, you might want to write a punchy "headline", or use an enticing question. Perhaps a catchy call to action?

5. Catchy words

You can use catchy words only if you know what is catchy in the eyes of your prospects. Avoid expressions (some call them buzzwords) like "make money", "client focused", "110% value", "innovative" because everybody uses them and they have become clichés (these are just a few examples; for more, check out Seth Godin's Encyclopedia of Business Clichés).

They are probably not appealing to your audience anymore, they're ineffective and for sure they won't make your offer stand out from the competition.

FREE is the strongest word that you can use in a banner, so be careful not to misuse it. Make sure you can really provide something valuable for free and everything will be ok. Don't try to trick users with a fake "free approach" - the only thing you'll get are some crazy clicks that have no value whatsoever because users will leave immediately.

Other words that can be catchy: limited offer, tips, secret, click to play, how to, why, new. Think in terms of benefits, not features. A feature is a technical aspect that describes the product, while a benefit can be seen as the way that feature solves a problem. Here's an example: feature – innovative fitness equipment, benefit - lose weight easily. People want to know how your product can make their lives easier.

6. Explicit call-to-action

Being involved in the process of crafting your ad, you know exactly what your prospects have to do. However, they might not find your subtle incentive so obvious. So the best bet is to write an explicit call to action.

A simple "click here [to...]" may just do the trick, but you can also experiment with some more specific approaches, like: "hire a freelancer", "read our free report", "join our contest", "click to play", "start your driving course now".

Whatever call to action you're going to use, don't try to fool users. The banner can create expectancy, so it's important the users won't feel let down after they click on it. If you are not sure whether to advertise your website as a whole or a particular product, choose the last one and relate the call-to-action to it.

It is more likely for someone to be interested in a particular product that solves a particular problem, than it is for them to be abstractly interested in your website. Again, it's about the customer, not the company.

7. Try different approaches

Ask people who are not involved in the process of making the ads what is their opinion regarding the message. If they are from your target group, it's even better. A fresh eye can bring something interesting. You can also make different versions of the same ad and ask your people which one makes more sense.

Design

8. Use standard sizes for your banners

Web banners can take any size you want. But there are two main reasons for them not taking any imaginable shape:
• because of the publishers' policy: websites that display banners accept only a few standard banner formats.
• efficiency: it's not cost effective, neither practical to create the same banner in a different format for each publisher.

So it's best to choose a standard size for your banner ad, although usually the size of the banner is one of the first things you talk about with the publisher before any creation endeavor takes place. The banner standard sizes were set with the help of the IAB (Interactive Advertising Bureau), the trade association for the Internet marketing industry. You can find them here.

9. Font trends / Font suggestions

The right selection of *typography* in a design can set the appropriate mood.
The first question is whether to use serif or sans serif fonts.

Sans-serif font

Serif font

Serif font (serifs in red)

Serif fonts are easy to identify by the little dashes at the ends of the various segments of a character. Serif fonts are usually easy to read if used in large blocks of text. But if the font size is too small, they can be harder to read than their sans serif counterpart.

The smallness of the banner will force you to use small characters too, so we wouldn't recommend you to use serifs in longish copies. However, you can use them in headlines, subheadlines, call to actions, buttons etc. Serif fonts can give the sense of sobriety, seriousness, professionalism, formalism, authenticity and trustfulness. Popular serif fonts examples: Adobe Caslon, Georgia, Times New Roman, Bookman Old Style, Garamond, Baskerville, Bodoni and Palatino Linotype.

Sans serif, meaning without serif, refers to typefaces without the little dashes that characterize the serif fonts.

The above fonts are all classical, widely-used typefaces, however you might want to use some kind of special fonts, if that helps you add a certain "feeling" to the ad. Some of the most popular special fonts categories are: "Western", "Typewriter", "Stencil", "Medieval/Old English", "Handwritten", "Retro", "Bitmap/Pixel", "Calligraphic" and so on.

Note that the above are not actual font names, but general categories of fonts. You can find a great array of free special fonts for each category if you do a quick search on the web.

Generally, on print, sans serif fonts were used in places where a large typeface was required, such as a newspaper headline.However, online, sans serif fonts are used virtually everywhere. That is because of their ability to keep their readability even when very small typefaces (under 8) are used.

Sans serif fonts can give the sense of friendliness, familiarity, easiness, simplicity, straightforwardness and boldness. Popular sans serif fonts examples: Helvetica, Trebuchet, Franklin Gothic, Myriad Pro, Calibri, Lucida Sans Unicode/Lucida Grande and Tahoma.

10. Color tips

Colors can add impact to your ad. Use strong colors (like red or bright orange) and it will automatically draw attention. Use pale colors and your banner will gain elegance and style.
But choosing the right colors isn't just an artistic quest, but a marketing and psychological pursuit. Colors can be used to emphasize, highlight, and lead your end users to perform an action (i.e. clicking on your banner). Colors can also trigger a wide array of emotions.

Kuler

COLOURlovers

When selecting the colors for your banner, sometimes it's advisable to consider the colors of the websites where you want to place it.
You could use the same colors to make your banner be mistaken for actual content.
Of course, "mistaken" isn't the right word if you really have something valuable to offer.

Avoid creating banners that feature speedy color shifting (e.g. red to green to red to green etc.), that makes your banner flash and flicker – it will only irritate the web surfers. Instead you could look at the page your banner ad will be going on, to get a feel for what colors will work best.
Also make sure you don't use too many different out-of-context colors or you could end up with an unattractive kitschy design.

Use color schemes generators, they are quite practical and inspiring. Get some colors ideas from Kuler and COLOURlovers.

11. Use images wisely

It's said a picture is worth a thousand words. I don't know whether the number is accurate, but the idea is that images can have a very high impact and can help you convey complex messages using few words.

Also images have the ability to draw attention to your ad, and in nowadays' market, attention is scarce and precious.

However, one drawback of the images is that they have a relatively big file size compared to texts, vector shapes and other such graphic elements. Therefore, if you don't use images correctly, the result will be an over-sized banner that no publisher will accept. Here are some things you can do to optimize your photos:

- Crop or resize your images. If you are going to make a 300×250 px banner don't load a picture of say 2400×1554 px. Use an image editor like Photoshop, Paint, Photo-Paint, IrfanView etc. to crop off the area of the picture you need. If you need approximately the whole picture, resize it, but be careful to constrain proportions. In this example you could resize the 2400×1554 px down to 16% of the original size, resulting a 408×264 px resized image. Now you can go further with the image optimization and crop this resized image to fit perfectly the 300×250 px size of the banner.

- Compress and save. In order to further optimize your images, you have to slightly compress them.

The most common image format that is going to be used to make banner ads is the JPG.

Save the image and set the compression level somewhere between 75-80%.

If you use Photoshop choose File>Save as for Web or save it normally being careful to set the compression level to 8-9 (out of 12). If you want to use transparent PNG, save it normally, without any compression.
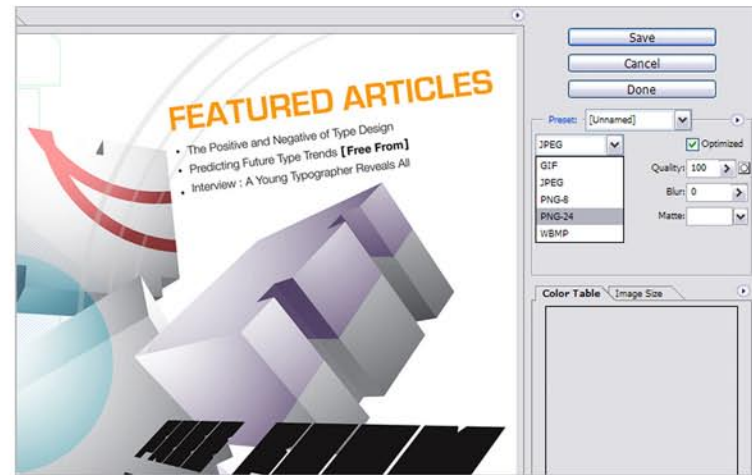
You can also edit your photos using one of these free online photo editing tools: Picnik, Pixlr or Aviary (read more about them).

A general design rule, regardless of you using just typefaces, or images too, is to have a center of interest in your composition, a well defined subject, just like in photography. That helps the users to set their eyes on one region of the banner and start "reading" it from there.

It's best when the users' eyes flow smoothly from an element of design to another. That will make them clearly understand your message.
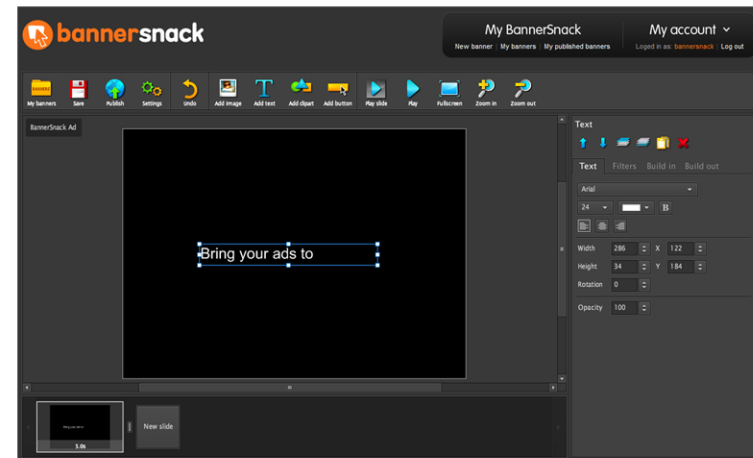
Animations

12. Bring your ads to life

There are basically two types of web banners:
static and animated.

Static banners take the form of image files (JPG,
PNG, GIF) that are usually created with a
professional image editor, such as Photoshop.
Their main advantage is that most publishers
accept them on their websites. And they're less
obnoxious for the viewers.

Animated banners take the form of flash objects
(SWF) or animated GIF banners. Flash banners
are created using Adobe Flash, BannerSnack and
other flash content editors and can feature very
complex movie-like animations.

Animated GIF banners on the other hand can be
created using a GIF editor, or an image editor
that allows you to make GIF animations.

GIF animations, unlike the flash ones, look more like
a picture slideshow created from a few slides,
typically from 2 to 5.

Animated banners are more likely to get noticed,
because the moving elements usually draw
attention.

Moreover, animated ads hold the advantage that,
by using multiple slides, the message sent through
them is more complex.

By using animations you can actually tell a story,
or - let's say - an introduction to the story that will
continue on your website.

13. Don't fool around with animations

Although animations can bring your ads to life, using animations abusively can in fact kill them.

It can be a bad idea to fill the banner with a lot of jumping, flashing, text going in and out, blurring and things like that.

Put yourself in the viewer's position: do you like the kind of ads that pop-out your eyeballs and mess with your patience?
Probably not.

Another disadvantage of overusing animations in banners is the increased FILE SIZE the banner will get. This will make your banner slower to download and implicitly the web page slower to display.

Anyway, there are some standards regarding the maximum file-size that is acceptable for a certain banner. Check them here. In any case, a publisher can differ from these general standards, so there's always room for negotiation.

14. Use looping wisely

Looping banners are animated banners (flash or GIF) that play their animations repeatedly.
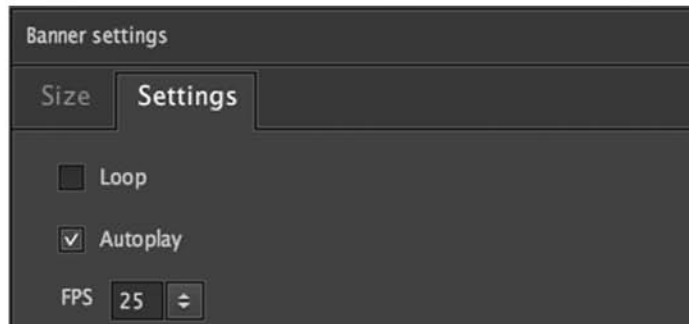
Should you loop or not? Our suggestion would be not to, because a never-ending looping ad can be really annoying, especially for those who have slow computers. Another aspect regarding this issue is the position of some publishers that don't accept looping ads.
IAB (Interactive Advertising Bureau)
recommends that a banner's animation length should be of maximum 15 seconds, including multiple loops. So to make it easier for you, the publisher and the viewer, don't loop.

15. Use expandable banners cleverly

Expandable banners, as their name suggests, are those banner ads that extend their size automatically or on user mouse action, such as roll over or click. Since this kind of banners can double or even triple their initial size, covering the content the users are reading, they can be very annoying.
Needless to say the most irritating ones are those who expand automatically, without the user's intervention.

However, those who expand on roll over aren't too soothing either; imagine that you accidentally hover over such an ad while reading an interesting article – you'll be desperate to find the X button...

Of course, the most acceptable form of expandable banners are those that expand on user click and have a visible close box.

Also a banner should remain expanded for maximum 3 seconds if there's no user interaction. Read more about these specifications here.

16. Avoid pop-ups and pop-unders

According to the IAB, "consumers do not distinguish pop-ups from pop-unders" and "more than 90% of consumers find pop-ups annoying or objectionable" (source). But this is nothing new, right? You yourself have probably a pop-up blocker installed, not to mention that many Internet browsers have a built-in pop-up blocker...
So the problem with pop-ups and pop-unders is that users won't see them and in case they will, they'll hate them. There's not much marketing grounding for using them.

17. Rich media banners

Rich media banners are flash banners that employ images, text, sound and video.

They are often interactive, inviting the user to play a game, navigate through different "pages", turn the sound on/off, select an item from a drop-down, pause the video and so on. Also, a rich media banner can use several other technologies besides Flash, such as Java, Javascript, and DHTML.
Rich media advertising is a big and growing trend. Advertisers are crazy about rich media banner ads, and for a good reason: they work much better than the conventional ones.
They significantly improve the user experience since users can interact with them.

These banners are usually fun to use, and they give users the information in a more exciting way than with any other type of ad.

More importantly, they will get much better click rates than basic flash and GIF banners.

We strongly suggest to use them, but they have a drawback, which is, they take more time and money to create. But if you are going to launch a big, well-planned campaign, it's worth the effort.

18. Be kind to your landing page

Neglecting your landing page is a very expensive mistake. It could ruin your campaign.

Why? Well, the landing page is the first thing your prospects will see after clicking your ad, so it's very important to make sure they won't leave your website in the next second. Otherwise, your advertising campaign is no more than wasted money. So the best bet is to give your landing page as much attention as you did with your ads, or perhaps a little more.

Having an effective ad that succeeds in attracting the user's attention is only half of the way.

The landing page should contain some of the (graphic) elements of the banner. It can be the logo, the copy, a photo or any other graphic element.

This will render the landing page familiar. Another advice is to link the banner directly to the web page that has the information the ad promises.

Your visitors have no time for searching for the product that was advertised to them in the banner. You wouldn't want your users to ask themselves "where am I?". They will most likely leave the page in a split second.
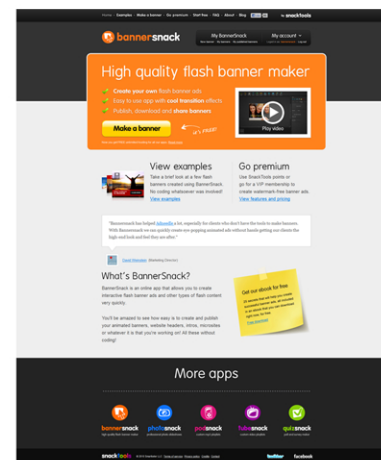
Placement & costs

19. Again, target

Think about the people who are likely to buy your product. What websites do they visit?

What are they interested in? Where do they get their information from ?

Answering these questions will help you make a list of websites where you could put the ad.

You will find a lot of websites, some of them bigger and better targeted then others, but knowing your audience it's the best starting point in selecting the right ones.

20. Avoid crowded places

When searching for websites where to advertise, avoid the ones that are crowded with ads, even if they have huge traffic. It won't help having a lot of other advertisements around yours: you will compete with other brands, you will compete for attention and for clicks.

Moreover, users are generally not happy to spend too much time on a page that looks like a hodgepodge collage of ads. They will simply not pay attention. A banner ad is most effective when it's alone on a certain page.

21. Try exchanging banners

Banner exchange is a common practice on the World Wide Web and involves at least two websites that agree to post each other's banners. In other words, you could make an agreement with another website to publish your banner in exchange for you doing the same.

However, if you opt for banner exchange, make sure the websites you're exchanging banners with are representative for your target audience. Benefits: banner exchange can send you targeted traffic, it can help you acquire some inbound links (that will help with your Google search ranking), and it's virtually free.

Disadvantages: you can distract visitors away to other sites before they had the chance to explore yours. You should use banner exchange wisely and avoid overusing it.

22. Resort to ad networks

A very handy and profitable way for buying advertising space is to resort to advertising networks. Ad networks are companies that connect web sites that want to host advertisements with advertisers who want to run advertisements. They have a portfolio of websites for each important domain category (like automobile, real estate, beauty, marketing etc).

You can search their portfolio for websites that you think your customers are interested in, but the best bet is to contact the ad network's representatives and give them specific information about your industry, your advertising goals, your budget and so on.

They will take care to make you a personalized offer. Also, they usually have a media kit, including detailed information about their demographic profile, the aggregate number of visitors per month, their technical requirements and so forth.

23. Choose a purchase system

Advertising on the Internet can be purchased in various systems, the most common being:

CPM = cost per mille (also called cost per thousand impressions)

It represents how much you'll pay for your ad to be shown a thousand times. The CPM system favors only the publishers because they'll receive revenue regardless of the campaign's success. Also, a thousand impressions doesn't guarantee that the ad will be actually seen 1000 times; the system only guarantees that it will be displayed 1000 times for a certain amount of money. The system's most important advantage for advertisers is the fact that they can easily compare media prices.

These facts made many of the advertisers move towards CPC and CPA.

CPC = cost per click

Is the amount of money paid per click-through. That means that you will pay only when your banner gets clicked and brings one visitor to the site. As an advertiser, you have to make sure the ad is relevant to the website's content and therefore a click has a good chance of turning into an action. You don't want to pay for users that abandon your site in seconds. The publisher, on the other hand has to make the ad visible for its visitors, because if they click he will get paid. The CPC system is widely spread today because it divides the risks and responsibilities equally between the publisher and the advertiser.

CPA = cost per action or cost per acquisition

Represents the cost for a specified action related to the ad. For example, this can be: a purchase, filling a form, an account registration, a request of information, a download and so on.

The CPA system favors you, the advertiser, because you will pay only if the ad was seen, clicked and the user has performed the intended action. Be careful at these purchase systems when you buy ad space.

Accept the ones that helps you best achieve your advertising goals and is the most cost-effective. For instance, if you want just brand awareness along with few accidental clicks, CPM is the right system for you.

On the other hand, if you want results with the least money possible, you should opt for a CPC or a CPA system.

Measurement

24. Use CTR to measure effectiveness

Online advertising, compared to its offline cousins, radio, TV, and newspapers, is attractive because it's directly measurable. Few years ago, display advertising focused on measuring impressions. The technique was borrowed from the world of TV ads. But the fact that an ad is displayed, does not imply it is actually seen by the users; impressions aren't the best way to measure marketing success. Then, a different metric was introduced: the click-through rate (CTR). This is calculated by dividing the number of users who clicked on the ad by the number of times the ad was displayed (impressions). For example if we have a click-through rate of 2%, it means that out of 100 impressions delivered, the banner was clicked on two times. Therefore, the higher the CTR is, the more effective the advertisement is. It's that simple.

25. Use a web analytics tool

A web analytics tool is usually a script that measures a visitor's journey on your website. A good example of such an analytics tool is Google Analytics.

Web analytics tools can provide you a wide array of data, such as daily visits, unique visitors, traffic sources, bounce rate, session duration, number of pages visited per session, and so on. These tools are very complex and it might take you a while to learn to work with them.

For measuring a banner advertising campaign's success, you can use a web analytics tool to check how many visitors you get from certain sites on which you advertise.

You can then check, how much time did the visitors spend on your site – did they visit more than a page, or did they leave your website immediately? You can also see where do your visitors click, whether they return or not, from what countries are they and much more useful information. Using a web analytics tool not only helps you measure the effectiveness of your banner campaigns, but also can give you a great insight into how your website works for your target audience.

Our last tip

Test, test, test

Use any data you can to try different approaches, use different formats, advertise with different publishers, so that you can learn from mistakes and reuse what was proven to work.

Remember

• when you create a banner advertising campaign start from defining your goal
• write a good copy with the audience in your mind: use their words, be brief and clear, don't be afraid to try different approaches
• the design should empower the message
• animate your banners to grab attention but don't go too far
• work hard for your landing page to lead visitors where you desire
• when searching for advertising space think about what your audience might
  be interested in and avoid the websites that are too crowded with ads
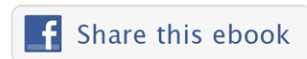• measure your results

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