BEFORE YOU SIGN • GUIDE 07

The Salon and Spa Edition

What every salon and spa owner needs to know about commercial space before they sign the lease.

07

A Note Before We Start

Opening a salon or spa is deeply personal. You have built your clientele, refined your menu of services, and developed a vision for the kind of experience you want to create. The space you choose is the physical expression of that vision. Getting the real estate decision right is what allows everything else to work.

Salon and spa real estate has a specific infrastructure profile that catches many first time owners off guard. Plumbing is the big one. The number of shampoo bowls, treatment rooms, pedicure stations, and wet areas you plan to operate directly determines the plumbing rough in requirements, which are among the most expensive and least reversible elements of any salon buildout.

This guide covers five areas: your space requirements, the Ohio licensing and permit picture for cosmetology establishments, the buildout reality, the lease clauses that matter most for salon and spa operators, and how to calculate what you can actually afford. Whether you are opening a full service salon, a day spa, a blowout bar, or a combination concept, this guide was written for you.

SECTION 1

Know Your Space Requirements

Salon and spa space is defined by its service stations, treatment rooms, and the wet areas that support them. Every service you plan to offer translates directly into a spatial and infrastructure requirement. Start with your service menu and work backward to your space needs, not the other way around.

Square Footage: Building From Your Service Menu

The right amount of space depends entirely on how many service providers you plan to have working simultaneously at peak capacity. Here is the framework by concept type:

Full Service Hair Salon	Plan for 100 to 150 square feet per styling station including the chair, mirror, work surface, and circulation space. A 10 station salon needs 1,000 to 1,500 square feet for the service floor alone, plus reception, shampoo area, backbar, break room, and retail.
Day Spa	Treatment rooms typically need 100 to 120 square feet of clear floor area each. A spa with six treatment rooms plus a relaxation lounge, reception, retail, and support space typically needs 1,800 to 3,000 square feet total.
Blowout Bar or Express Concept	Styling stations without full chemical services can be more compact: 80 to 100 square feet per station. A 10 station blowout bar can operate in 1,000 to 1,400 square feet with efficient design.
Combined Salon and Spa	Full service concepts with both hair and spa services need to plan for both station counts and treatment room counts independently, then add support space. Most combined concepts start at 2,000 square feet and scale from there.
Support Space	Reception and retail, backbar and dispensary, laundry, break room, and restrooms typically account for 25 to 35 percent of total square footage. Do not underbudget this.

IMPORTANT

Design your space for your peak staffing level, not your opening day staffing level. A salon that is designed too tightly from the start cannot grow without a disruptive and expensive renovation.

Plumbing: The Infrastructure That Defines Your Layout

Plumbing is the most important infrastructure consideration in any salon or spa buildout. Every shampoo bowl, pedicure station, facial sink, mop sink, break room sink, and restroom requires plumbing rough in. Here is what you need to assess before you sign:

- Confirm the location and capacity of the existing water supply and drain lines in the space. In a former salon, rough ins may already exist in useful locations. In a space that has never been a salon, all plumbing must be installed from scratch.
- Shampoo bowls require both hot and cold water supply and a dedicated drain. In ground floor spaces, drains typically tie into the building's sewer line directly. In upper floor spaces, drain line routing becomes a significant cost and complexity factor.
- Pedicure chairs with spa bowls require plumbing connections unless they use self contained water systems. Confirm which type you are planning and what the plumbing requirements are for your specific equipment.
- Water heater capacity must be sized for your peak simultaneous demand. A salon with 10 shampoo bowls and 4 pedicure stations operating at the same time requires substantially more hot water than a standard commercial water heater provides. Factor in a dedicated or supplemental water heating system.
- Upper floor spaces are significantly more expensive and complicated for salon plumbing than ground floor spaces. If you are considering an upper floor location, get a plumber to assess the drain line routing options and costs before you sign.

Ventilation and Air Quality

Salons and spas generate chemical fumes, aerosols, and humidity at levels that standard commercial HVAC systems are not designed to manage. This is a health, safety, and code issue, not just a comfort issue:

- Chemical services including relaxers, keratin treatments, color, and acrylic nail work produce fumes that require dedicated exhaust ventilation. Many municipalities and Ohio regulations require ventilation systems that meet specific air exchange rate standards for these services.
- Confirm that the existing HVAC system can be modified to provide adequate fresh air exchange for the services you plan to offer. In many older commercial spaces it cannot without a significant upgrade.
- If you plan to offer nail services within a salon and spa concept, be aware that nail service ventilation requirements are among the most stringent in the personal care industry. See the Nail Salon Edition for more detail on this specific topic.
- Spa treatment rooms that use steam, heated towels, or wet treatments need humidity management built into the HVAC design for that zone.

Electrical Requirements

Salon and spa electrical demands are higher than standard retail. High wattage dryers, color processing lamps, massage table warmers, steamer units, and point of sale systems all draw power simultaneously. Assess the existing electrical service capacity and confirm it is adequate for your planned equipment load before you sign. A full service salon typically needs 200 amps minimum. Combined salon and spa concepts may need more.

Laundry

Spas that provide linens, towels, and robes need on site laundry facilities or a reliable linen service. If you plan to launder on site, confirm that the space has or can accommodate a washer and dryer hookup with adequate drainage, electrical capacity, and ventilation. This is a frequently overlooked infrastructure requirement that can be difficult and expensive to add after the fact.

Parking and Accessibility

Salon and spa clients typically have appointments and arrive within a defined time window. Parking convenience is a direct factor in client retention. A client who struggles to park consistently will eventually find a salon that is easier to get to. Assess peak hour parking availability at your prospective location and confirm that accessible parking spaces are available in the required ratio near your entrance.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU COMMIT

- Has this space ever been a salon or spa and where are the existing plumbing rough ins located?
- What is the floor level and how does that affect drain line routing?
- What is the existing HVAC capacity and can it support salon ventilation requirements?
- What is the electrical service capacity?
- Is there an existing washer and dryer hookup or can one be added?
- What is peak hour parking availability at this location?

SECTION 2

Permit and Licensing Pitfalls

Ohio has a detailed regulatory framework for cosmetology establishments. The Ohio State Cosmetology and Barber Board licenses the establishment itself, not just the individual practitioners. This means your physical space must meet specific requirements before you can open, regardless of how qualified your staff is. Understanding this regulatory picture before you sign your lease is essential.

Ohio State Cosmetology and Barber Board: Establishment License

Every cosmetology establishment in Ohio, including salons, spas, barber shops, and specialty services, must hold a valid establishment license issued by the Ohio State Cosmetology and Barber Board. Here is what the process involves:

- You must submit a floor plan of the proposed establishment to the Board for review before you begin construction or open. The floor plan must show station locations, shampoo bowl placement, restroom location, dispensary, and all other relevant areas.
- The Board will review the plan and may request modifications before issuing plan approval. Do not begin construction until you have Board plan approval in hand.
- After construction is complete, a Board inspector will visit the location to confirm that the as built space matches the approved plan. The establishment license is issued after a successful inspection.
- License fees vary by establishment type and size. Budget for both the application fee and the annual renewal.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> The Ohio State Cosmetology and Barber Board plan review process runs on its own timeline, separate from your building permit review. Start both processes simultaneously. A delay in Board approval can push your opening date even after your buildout is complete.

Individual Practitioner Licenses

Every person who provides cosmetology services in your establishment must hold a valid Ohio cosmetology, esthetics, nail technology, or barber license as appropriate for their scope of services. You are responsible as the establishment owner for confirming that all practitioners working in your space are properly licensed before they begin providing services. An unlicensed practitioner in your establishment creates liability for you, not just for them.

Ohio Board Requirements for Physical Space

The Ohio State Cosmetology and Barber Board has specific physical requirements for licensed establishments. Key requirements include:

- Minimum square footage requirements per operator workstation in some service categories.
- Handwashing sink requirements: at least one handwashing sink must be accessible to service providers and separate from shampoo or service basins.
- Dispensary or backbar area for storing professional products, with adequate ventilation if chemical products are stored.
- Clean and soiled linen storage areas that are physically separated.
- Restroom facilities for both staff and clients, which may be shared with other tenants in a building but must be accessible from the establishment without passing through another business.

The Board's requirements are detailed and are updated periodically. Download the current Ohio cosmetology establishment standards from the Board's website and review them with your designer before finalizing your floor plan.

Building Permits and Plumbing Permits

In addition to the Board's requirements, your local municipality requires building permits for any construction work and separate plumbing permits for all plumbing installations. The building permit and the Board's plan review are parallel processes that must both be completed before you open. Do not assume that approval from one satisfies the other. They are separate regulatory bodies with separate requirements.

Massage Therapy

If your spa concept includes massage therapy services, the Ohio State Medical Board licenses massage therapists. Massage therapy establishments in some Ohio municipalities require a separate business registration or permit beyond the cosmetology establishment license. Confirm with your local municipality whether a massage therapy establishment permit is required in addition to your cosmetology establishment license.

Spa Services and Ohio Health Regulations

Body wrap services, hydrotherapy, and certain esthetic services that involve the skin or body may be subject to oversight beyond cosmetology licensing depending on how they are classified. If your service menu includes specialty treatments that go beyond standard cosmetology or esthetics, confirm the regulatory classification of those services with the Board before you build your treatment rooms around them.

ADA Compliance

Salon and spa spaces must be accessible to clients with disabilities. Key areas requiring attention:

- Accessible entrance and accessible route throughout the client facing areas of the establishment.
- At least one shampoo bowl or service station positioned and designed to be accessible to a client in a wheelchair.
- Accessible restrooms with compliant clearances, fixture heights, and hardware.
- Reception and retail areas with accessible checkout counter height.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU COMMIT

- Have I downloaded and reviewed the current Ohio State Cosmetology and Barber Board establishment standards?
- Does my floor plan concept meet the Board's minimum physical requirements before I finalize it?
- Does my municipality require a separate massage therapy establishment permit?
- Are there any ADA compliance gaps in the existing space that would need to be addressed in my buildout?
- What is the building permit review timeline for my planned scope of work?

SECTION 3

Buildout Reality Check

Salon and spa buildouts are among the most infrastructure intensive personal service buildouts you can undertake. The combination of plumbing, electrical, ventilation, and finish requirements makes the cost per square foot higher than most operators anticipate. Here is an honest breakdown of what you are looking at before you start negotiating.

What Does It Actually Cost

Salon and spa buildout costs in the Midwest generally fall in these ranges:

Basic Salon Buildout	Styling stations, shampoo area, basic finishes, and reception in a second generation salon space with existing rough ins. Budget 60 to 100 dollars per square foot.
Mid Level Salon or Blowout Bar	Custom millwork, upgraded lighting, branded environment, new plumbing rough ins. Budget 100 to 150 dollars per square foot.
Day Spa or Combined Concept	Treatment rooms with custom finishes, spa plumbing, HVAC upgrades, relaxation lounge, and premium materials throughout. Budget 150 to 250 dollars per square foot or more.
Equipment and Furnishings	Styling chairs, shampoo bowls, pedicure stations, treatment tables, steamers, color processing equipment, and retail fixtures are budgeted separately from construction. A fully equipped 10 station salon package runs 30,000 to 80,000 dollars. A spa treatment room package runs 5,000 to 15,000 dollars per room.

Plumbing: The Line Item That Surprises Everyone

Plumbing is where salon and spa buildout costs deviate most dramatically from operator expectations. Here is a realistic breakdown:

- Shampoo bowl rough in, including supply lines, drain, and connection: 800 to 2,000 dollars per bowl depending on location and existing infrastructure.
- Pedicure station plumbing rough in: 500 to 1,500 dollars per station for plumbed units.
- New water heater sized for salon demand: 2,000 to 6,000 dollars installed depending on capacity and type.
- Laundry hookup installation: 1,500 to 4,000 dollars depending on drain routing complexity.

- Full plumbing package for a ground floor 10 station salon with shampoo bowls and support sinks: 15,000 to 35,000 dollars total. Upper floor locations can double or triple this cost.

Second Generation Salon Space

Leasing a space that was previously a salon can significantly reduce your buildout cost if the existing plumbing rough ins are in locations that work for your layout. Before you assume existing rough ins save you money:

- Have a plumber assess the condition of existing drain lines. Older PVC or cast iron drain lines in former salon spaces can be compromised by years of chemical exposure and hair accumulation.
- Confirm that the location of existing rough ins is compatible with your planned layout. Moving a shampoo bowl rough in even six feet costs more than starting fresh in the right location.
- Ask whether the prior salon's plumbing was ever permitted and inspected. Unpermitted plumbing work that does not meet code creates problems for your own permit application.

Lighting for Salon and Spa

Lighting serves two different functions in a salon and spa: functional task lighting for service providers who need accurate color rendering and precise visibility, and ambient lighting that creates the atmosphere clients experience. Budget for both:

- Styling station lighting with a color rendering index of 90 or higher is essential for accurate color work. Budget 400 to 800 dollars per station for quality lighting.
- Treatment room lighting needs dimming capability and warm tones to create a relaxing environment. Budget 300 to 600 dollars per room.
- Reception and retail lighting should be inviting and flattering. This is where clients form their first impression of your brand.

Tenant Improvement Allowance Strategy

Landlords often view salon and spa tenants favorably because personal care services are internet resistant, drive consistent traffic, and are not subject to the same seasonal swings as some retail concepts. Use this as leverage in your TI negotiation:

- Emphasize the permanent nature of your buildout improvements. Plumbing rough ins, electrical upgrades, and custom millwork stay in the space and increase its value.
- Longer lease terms yield higher TI. A seven to ten year lease term is common for salon and spa concepts given the significant buildout investment. Use the length of your commitment to justify a higher allowance.
- Get a detailed plumber's estimate before you negotiate TI. Walking in with a real plumbing cost number demonstrates that you understand what the buildout actually requires.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU COMMIT

- Has this space been a salon before and where are the existing plumbing rough ins?
- What is the condition of any existing drain lines?
- What is the TI allowance and does it cover plumbing and HVAC upgrades?
- What is the lease term and does it justify the buildout investment?
- Is the space on the ground floor or an upper floor and how does that affect plumbing costs?

SECTION 4

Understanding Your Lease

Salon and spa leases have specific pressure points that reflect the infrastructure intensive nature of the business and the personal service model that drives revenue. Here are the provisions that matter most for salon and spa operators.

Use Clause

Push for a use clause that covers the full range of personal care and wellness services you offer or may offer in the future. A use clause written narrowly for hair salon services only can prevent you from adding esthetic services, massage, nail services, or retail without landlord consent. Negotiate for language that covers personal care, beauty, wellness, and related retail broadly. If you plan to add services as the business grows, the use clause is where that flexibility starts.

Plumbing and Structural Modifications

Plumbing installation is a permanent structural modification to the space. Most leases require landlord approval for any work that affects the structure, plumbing, or electrical systems. Confirm in writing before you sign:

- That the landlord approves the scope of your planned plumbing work as a condition of the lease.
- What the approval process looks like for changes to the approved plan during construction.
- What the restoration obligations are at lease expiration. Some landlords require removal of all plumbing installations. Others allow them to remain. Get this in writing before your buildout begins.

Exclusivity

Exclusivity for a salon or spa means the landlord cannot lease adjacent space to a direct competitor. Define your exclusivity around your primary services. A full service salon might negotiate exclusivity around hair services including cutting, coloring, and chemical treatments. A day spa might negotiate around massage and esthetic services. Be specific. Broad exclusivity around all beauty services is unlikely to be granted in a larger center but targeted exclusivity around your core service category is achievable.

Subletting and Booth Rental

Many salon operators run a booth rental model where individual stylists lease their station from the salon owner rather than working as employees. This is an important business model consideration that intersects with your lease in a specific way:

- Most commercial leases prohibit subletting without landlord consent. Booth rental arrangements are legally a form of subletting. Before you structure your business as a booth rental operation, confirm that your lease permits this or negotiate language that explicitly allows it.
- Ohio has specific regulations governing the booth rental relationship. Each booth renter must hold their own cosmetology license. The establishment license holder remains responsible for the establishment's compliance with Board standards regardless of the employment model.

Hours of Operation

Salons and spas often operate extended hours including evenings and weekends, which are peak appointment times for clients who work standard business hours. Confirm that your lease permits your intended operating schedule and that building access, parking lot lighting, and HVAC are available during those hours. After hours HVAC charges are a real cost that many tenants discover after signing.

Odor Provisions

Chemical services produce strong odors. Some leases include provisions that allow the landlord to require you to address complaints about odors affecting adjacent tenants. Understand what these provisions require and confirm that your ventilation design is adequate to prevent cross contamination of odors into common areas or adjacent spaces before you commit to the location.

Personal Guarantee

Given the significant buildout investment in a salon or spa, the personal guarantee period is especially important. Negotiate:

- A guarantee burn down provision that reduces your exposure after a defined period of on time payment.
- A good guy clause that terminates personal liability upon vacating and giving proper notice.
- A cap on total personal exposure that reflects the length of your lease term and your buildout investment.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU COMMIT

- Does the use clause cover all the services I offer now and might add in the future?
- Does the lease explicitly permit booth rental arrangements?
- Does the landlord approve the scope of planned plumbing modifications in writing before I sign?
- What are the restoration requirements for plumbing at lease expiration?
- Are there odor provisions and how are they defined?
- What are the personal guarantee terms?

SECTION 5

What Can You Actually Afford

Salon and spa businesses generate revenue per service provider, not per square foot the way retail does. Understanding your revenue model before you sign the lease is how you make sure the math works before you commit to a five year or longer obligation.

The Salon and Spa Rent Rule

The personal care industry benchmark is that occupancy costs should not exceed 8 to 12 percent of gross revenue. Full service salons with efficient booth rental models can sometimes sustain up to 12 percent. Owner operated concepts with employee stylists need to stay closer to 8 to 10 percent because payroll is a larger share of their cost structure. Day spas with high treatment room revenue per hour can approach 10 to 12 percent if their average ticket is strong.

Revenue Per Chair and Per Room

The core productivity metrics for salon and spa are revenue per styling chair and revenue per treatment room. These numbers drive your capacity analysis:

Revenue Per Chair	A productive full time stylist in a Northeast Ohio market typically generates 60,000 to 120,000 dollars in annual service revenue. Use 70,000 dollars as a conservative baseline for capacity modeling.
Revenue Per Treatment Room	A treatment room operating at efficient utilization with an average ticket of 90 to 120 dollars and 5 to 6 appointments per day generates 120,000 to 200,000 dollars annually. Model conservatively at 100,000 dollars per room.
Utilization Rate	Salons and spas rarely operate at full capacity. Model at 70 to 75 percent of chair and room capacity for your stabilized revenue projection.

Booth Rental vs. Employee Model

Your revenue model affects your affordability calculation significantly:

- Booth rental model: your gross revenue is the booth rental income you collect from stylists, not the stylists' service revenue. Booth rental rates in Northeast Ohio typically run 150 to 350 dollars per week per station. Your occupancy cost must be supportable by your booth rental income, not by your stylists' total revenue.

- Employee model: your gross revenue includes all service and retail revenue. Your payroll cost is typically 40 to 50 percent of gross revenue, which means your remaining margin to cover occupancy, supplies, and profit is compressed. Occupancy cost discipline is especially important in this model.

Total Occupancy Cost

Beyond base rent, account for:

- CAM charges: common area maintenance, typically 2 to 6 dollars per square foot annually.
- Property taxes: your proportional share in a triple net or modified gross lease.
- Utilities: salons and spas are above average water and energy users. Get 12 months of prior utility data before you project your costs.
- After hours HVAC: if you operate evenings and weekends, confirm the cost of extended HVAC operation.

The Affordability Formula

> **STEP 1: PROJECT YOUR STABILIZED ANNUAL GROSS REVENUE (BOOTH RENTAL INCOME OR SERVICE REVENUE DEPENDING ON YOUR MODEL)**
>
> **Step 2: Multiply by 0.10 (10%) to get your maximum annual occupancy budget**
>
> **Step 3: Divide by 12 for your maximum monthly occupancy budget**
>
> **Step 4: Subtract CAM, taxes, and utilities from the monthly budget**
>
> **What remains is your maximum affordable base rent.**

Example

Eight station salon in a booth rental model. Average booth rent of 200 dollars per week per station, 50 weeks per year, at 85 percent occupancy. Annual gross revenue (booth rental income): 68,000 dollars. Maximum occupancy budget at 10 percent: 6,800 dollars per year, or 567 dollars per month. Estimated CAM, taxes, and utilities: 400 dollars per month. Maximum affordable base rent: approximately 167 dollars per month. At 1,200 square feet, that is 1.67 dollars per square foot annually.

That number tells you immediately that a booth rental model needs a low rent location, significant station count, or premium booth rental rates to support typical market rents. Run your actual numbers before you fall in love with a space.

IMPORTANT NOTE

The booth rental revenue model appears profitable on the surface because your gross margin on booth rent is high. But the rent to revenue ratio analysis on booth rental income alone often reveals that a traditional booth rental salon needs either very low rent, very high station count, or premium booth rates to sustain market rate commercial rent. Know your model before you sign.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU COMMIT

- What is my revenue model and what does my gross revenue actually include?
- What booth rental rate is the market supporting in this area?
- What is the realistic occupancy rate for my stations or treatment rooms in the first 12 months?
- Do I have adequate capital to cover the buildout gap between TI and actual cost?
- What are the prior year actual utility costs for this space?

BEFORE YOU SIGN

The Salon and Spa Edition: Cheat Sheet

The Affordability Formula

Formula	Your Numbers
Stabilized Annual Gross Revenue x 10%	$_____
Divide by 12 = Monthly Occupancy Budget	$_____
Minus: CAM + Taxes + Insurance	($_____)
Max Affordable Base Rent (Monthly)	**$_____**

Key Benchmarks to Remember

Rent to Revenue Ratio	Total occupancy cost should not exceed 8 to 12 percent of gross revenue. Know which revenue number to use based on your business model.
Revenue Per Chair	Model at 70,000 dollars annually per full time stylist at 75 percent utilization as a conservative baseline.
Revenue Per Treatment Room	Model at 100,000 dollars annually per room at 75 percent utilization as a conservative baseline.
Buildout Cost Range	60 to 250 dollars per square foot depending on concept and whether plumbing rough ins exist. Equipment is budgeted separately.
Plumbing Budget	15,000 to 35,000 dollars for a ground floor 10 station salon. Upper floor locations can double or triple this.
Board Approval	Submit floor plan to Ohio State Cosmetology and Barber Board before construction. Run parallel with building permit process.

Pre Opening Permit and Licensing Checklist

	Item	Notes
☐	Ohio Cosmetology Board floor plan submitted	*Before any construction begins*

☐	Ohio Cosmetology Board plan approval received	*Do not begin construction without this*
☐	Building permit obtained	*Required before permitted construction work*
☐	Plumbing permit obtained	*Separate from building permit; required for all plumbing work*
☐	Electrical permit obtained (if upgrading service)	*Required for panel or service upgrades*
☐	Ohio Cosmetology establishment inspection passed	*After construction; required before license is issued*
☐	Ohio Cosmetology establishment license issued	*Required before opening to clients*
☐	All practitioner licenses confirmed on file	*Every service provider must hold a valid Ohio license*
☐	Massage therapy establishment permit obtained (if applicable)	*Confirm with local municipality*
☐	Certificate of occupancy issued	*Required before opening to the public*
☐	ADA compliance review completed	*Accessible station, restrooms, reception*
☐	Signage permit obtained	*Municipality specific requirement*

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR LANDLORD BEFORE YOU SIGN

- Has this space been a salon before and where are the existing plumbing rough ins?
- What floor level is the space and how does that affect plumbing costs?
- What is the TI allowance and does it cover plumbing and HVAC upgrades?
- Does the lease explicitly permit booth rental arrangements?
- What plumbing modifications require written landlord approval?
- What are the restoration requirements for plumbing at lease expiration?
- Are there odor provisions and how are they enforced?
- What are the operating hour restrictions and are there HVAC overage charges?
- What are the prior year actual CAM, tax, and utility costs?
- What are the personal guarantee terms?

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This guide is for educational purposes only and does not constitute legal or financial advice. Always consult a licensed attorney and accountant before signing a commercial lease.

QUESTIONS ABOUT COMMERCIAL SPACE?

Let's talk it through.

Hey, I'm CiCi Caver, Licensed Real Estate Sales Agent at Kowit and Company Real Estate Group. If you're looking at a space in Cuyahoga County and want a second set of eyes before you sign, reach out.

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