

Landing Page Handbook: Basics 101

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Chapter 1: Basics 101

What's a Landing Page and Why Does it Matter?

A landing page is where a person “lands” when they click on an online ad banner, search engine result, email link, or when they visit a special promotional URL that they heard about on TV, radio, or other offline media.

Very few perfect landing pages exist out there. In fact, most of the samples in this Handbook aren't completely perfect, although they represent the current cream of the crop.

The perfect few are usually the result of extensive multivariate testing. And when we talk to the marketers behind them, invariably they say, "But I have a few more tests I'd like to run to see if I can improve conversions a bit more..." (More on testing in Chapter 5.)

Unfortunately, most marketers don't have the time or budget line for extensive landing page testing to discover what works best for their offers. They have a campaign launching soon and a landing page is needed pronto! Often the landing page is the least considered element of the entire campaign. Marketers who'll fuss over ad creative, and fret for hours about media buys, will ask the design department to fling something up there to land on.

We suspect many marketers truly believe that if their outbound campaign is good enough, the creative will pre-sell prospects on the offer, so they'll convert no matter how lame the landing page is. In other

What's not a landing page?

Landing pages are often confused with splash pages, bridge pages, jump pages and microsities.

Splash pages are graphic introductions — often full screen — to Web content, usually a home page. Usually, splash pages are made in Flash and allow the user to skip them. (Note: Splash pages are in general an extremely bad idea. Users dislike them, often vehemently. And, your site traffic will generally plummet as a result of having placed this barrier in front of it.)

Bridge pages (a.k.a. doorway, portal, and gateway pages) are designed to be particularly enticing for search engines, not visitors.

Jump pages attract attention to a particular offer or event. They must be closed or navigated through to get to the desired content. An example — a full page ad that appears in front of you when you are trying to visit the home page of Salon.com.

Microsities are a cross between a landing page and a regular Web site. They often have their own domain names, and even brands separate from the organization's brand. They are used when a marketer wants to offer a user an extended experience for branding or educational purposes. In fact, a site the visitor might even return to as a destination.

Although landing pages can have several linked pages, they generally don't allow many navigational options. You can move forward through the conversion process, or you can leave. On the other hand microsities invite you to explore and click around within the experience.

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words, many marketers think the outbound campaign is doing the heavy lifting and the landing page exists simply as a passive collection cup for all the sales or leads generated by the campaign.

In fact, the exact opposite is generally true.

The only thing the outbound campaign did was get a prospect to click or type the URL into their browser. That's a microscopically unimportant decision compared to whatever the landing page asks them to do.

Your ad convinced them to click. It's a split-second, what-the-heck, decision.

Your landing page has to convince them to stick around for at least a minute or two and possibly do a bunch of fairly unpleasant stuff:

- Do a bunch of reading (90% of the population doesn't like reading).
- Laboriously type their name and address (only geeks use auto form fill).
- Hand over a phone number so a telemarketer will pester them.
- Give an email and take the risk of being spammed.
- Dig out a credit card and maybe have it stolen by a phisher or fraudster.
- Pay for something.

No wonder average landing page conversions are in the single digits — even for free offers! How do you get visitors over those nasty humps? Well, that's the purpose of this Handbook.

Typical landing page conversion rates are fairly low

As you can see from the chart below, landing page conversions from typical online campaigns are not thrilling. The data was gathered from more than 5,000 MarketingSherpa readers who are active online marketers responding to our surveys.

Chart 1.1: Conversion Rate Averages for Search and Email Landing Pages

Lead Source	Conversion Rate Averages
Search Free offers	
Organic Search (non-optimized)	4.1%
Organic Search (optimized)	6.1%
Organic Search Average	4.4%
Pay per Click	3.9%
Search Buy now offers	
Organic Search	1.99%
Paid Inclusion	1.42%
Pay per Click	1.38%
Emails to House Lists Free offers	
Business to Consumer	11.31%
Business to Business	10.21%
Email to House Lists Buy now offers	
Business to Consumer	7.63%
Business to Business	5.67%
Emails to 3rd Party Lists Free offers	
Business to Consumer	4.47%
Business to Business	5.23%
Email to 3rd Party Lists Buy now offers	
Business to Consumer	.97%
Business to Business	.85%

Source: MarketingSherpa reader surveys April-July 2004.

Anecdotal evidence from MarketingSherpa Case Studies indicates the situation may not be as dire for visitors who are generated by offline campaigns. We've heard of conversion rates as high as 50%, but more often responses are in the teens for free offers and higher single digits for buy-now offers.

The theory is that because prospects have to take more of an effort to respond to an offline campaign by going to a computer and hand-typing in a URL, they are already further down the decision-tree or have more emotionally vested in your landing page being the right place for them.

Here's the funny thing — every single click you get to your landing page is hoping to convert. They really want your page to be the right place. It's a bit like audiences listening to a comedian do a stand-up routine; they are there because they really want to laugh. But, that doesn't mean lousy jokes will work and neither will lousy landing pages.

As the data above indicates, most landing pages are pretty darn lousy.

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Want to improve your landing page? First you have to see it from the visitor's perspective...

Four Steps of the Conversion Process: How a Visitor Experiences Your Landing Page

As you can see from this figure, there are four very distinct stages in the average visitor's conversion decision process. The numbers are extremely rough averages, but they give you an idea:

Figure 1.1: The Conversion Process, A Rough Guideline



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Stage one: "Should I bail?"

Most people don't come to your landing page, read every word of your copy, review every graphic, click on every link and then mull over their decision thoughtfully.

Even though you got the person to click, they are still very much undecided about accepting your offer. Their first decision takes place in a tiny handful of seconds. They are quickly glancing at your landing page to decide if this page is worth looking at, at all. They want to know, "Am I in the right place? Does this match what I was expecting/hoping to see? Should I bother to read the copy or should I click away immediately?"

You'll lose the vast majority of your clicks at this stage. As many as 50% may decide — based on a quick glance — that your page isn't worth it to them. If your landing page has multiple goals, then that bail rate may be higher because copy, hotlinks and design elements may not be focused enough to prove — at a glance — that this page is a useful one to continue viewing.

Design elements that can directly impact the bail factor:

- Scary-looking registration forms with lots of fields to fill out.
- Wording in your headline and its relevance to the *individual* visitor.
- Graphics that apply directly to the key benefit of the page, rather than generic "feel good" stuff like unknown logos and clip art.
- Overall length of copy, combined with perceived readability (tiny type, reverse type).
- Layout: will this be hard to figure out or does it look fairly straightforward?
- Design: does this look professional or amateurish?

Stage two: Should I accept this offer?

Once visitors have decided your landing page is worth viewing, you then have anywhere from a few more seconds to a couple of minutes — depending on your offer and obvious value — to convince them to convert. During this time, visitors may read copy.

Design elements that can directly affect the acceptance decision:

- Copywriting.
- Rich media information (streamed audio and/or video).
- Testimonials and other credentials such as guarantees and security icons.

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- Design of your competitor's landing pages, especially for hotlinks from search because visitors may have two or more landing pages open at once.
- Information about offer — Are there enough details to make a sound decision? Each demographic has a very different idea about how many details are needed.

Stage three: Conversion attempt

They've decided they want to say yes to you, now they need to actually do it. You can still lose the conversion at this stage, especially if it's an impulse item that visitors don't desperately require. During this time visitors are actively typing information into forms, searching for click links, order buttons, or contact info for customer service.

Design elements that can directly affect the conversion decision:

- Cart hang-ups and post-click error pages.
- Required fields in forms, especially phone number.
- "Clear form" or "reset" button which might be mistakenly clicked instead of the submission button.
- Inadequate shipping and/or pricing information.
- Multiple hotlinks leading to different destinations rather than one single conversion destination (including a search box, about us and other standard navigation from your main site).
- Lack of email privacy information directly next to the email input box.
- Lack of alternate modes of communication/conversion (email, phone, IM).

Step four: Conversion success

Wahoo! They've done it. They've clicked the form submit button, added to their cart or had such an engrossing experience with your microsite that their offline purchase intent is soaring. And it worked, no errors, no typos and no problems.

The Six Steps of Landing Page Design

Excited about making your landing page better? Great. The good news is a landing page designed for a higher conversion rate probably won't cost you much more than landing pages you are creating now. You can spend a bunch of money, but you don't

absolutely need to. We know of many marketers on extremely tight budgets, and no spare staff, who have extraordinary landing pages.

The bad news — it's more time, thought, and work. This can be a distinct competitive advantage for you. Many marketers don't really want to work all that hard. If you're prepared to roll up your shirtsleeves, the battle is almost won.

Here are the six steps you'll need to go through:

Step #1. Conversion definition

Before you start creating the landing page, first you must define precisely what conversion activity you need to take place from it. A landing page conversion might be:

- eCommerce — adding an item to a shopping cart and beginning the check-out process.
- Lead generation — filling out a registration form to accept an offer (generally free) with the implicit understanding that this may lead someday to a sale. Offers might include white papers, webinars, coupons, price quotes, trials and/or samples.
- Branding/education — spending a significant amount of time examining and/or interacting with content on the site that the landing page is a gateway for. (In addition to time spent and pages viewed, measurement may also involve a brand awareness and purchase intent study.)
- Relationship — opting-in to receive communications from the brand/publisher on an ongoing basis. These may be emails, an RSS feed, a print newsletter, etc. A commercial relationship goal may be implied but not overt.
- Membership — registering to actively use the site on an ongoing basis in exchange for either payment, an implied agreement to view advertising, or to allow one's activity data to be measured.
- Viral outreach — telling personal and professional contacts about the landing page, perhaps via an email tool, blog links, word-of-mouth, etc.

One big mistake we see marketers make with landing pages is to assume (or hope) a landing page can handle two or three different conversion goals. Most typically, these are branding/education plus lead generation. So marketers try to pack in copy, hotlinks, and other design elements on the page to make it do heavy lifting in several directions. For example, you may include your standard site navigation bars on the

landing page, or sales copy unrelated to the specific offer about how wonderful your brand is.

Step #2. Selecting URLs and hosting

Next you must decide where the landing page should reside. Will it have its own URL? Will each individual you target have their own URL? Will you need many URLs all leading to the same landing page? Is there a chance that anyone will need to hand-type or cut-and-paste the URL in from another document? Does the URL need to be easy to remember? How about easy to spell?

See our section below on URLs for more advice and details...

Plus, the page must be hosted on a server. Many marketers let their agency host the page. This is a great solution if your IT department can't handle the job. Key considerations — how long do you expect this landing page to be alive? Campaigns, even email ones, can last far longer than you think and an agency may not leave your page up for long enough. Plus, if you cancel your agency relationship, you may lose the page as well.

Other considerations — who has the best Web analytics and time to study tracking reports? Who can make fast changes to the page when you learn what works from testing?

Step #3. Demographic research

Get your mind off your campaign, your messaging, your creative, your offering and into your prospect's mind. Some marketers run quick emailed surveys of their current user base to discover which benefit statements and offers hit home. Others call a few customers on the phone. Others conduct fancy focus groups.

At the very least create a profile of your perfect converter. You may have more than one of these. If you do, look at each profile and decide which the biggest market is. Then construct your landing page for that particular one and ignore the ancillaries. You may even want multiple landing pages or campaigns, one for each market, someday.

Don't construct a page to appeal broadly across a wide variety of "typical" users. It won't appeal to anyone at all and your conversions will suffer. Visitors have to believe this offer is perfect for their own individual needs. They won't take the time to wade through sales copy with benefit statements aimed at other people. If it doesn't apply to them directly and immediately, they are bailing from your page faster than you can blink.

You have 0-8 seconds to convince visitors this page is for them and them alone. At most they'll read 15 words. If your copy targets multiple demographics, those 15 words will not work.

Step #4. Graphic elements, layout, and form design

Now comes the actual wireframing. You'll make a list of all the specific elements that have to be included on the page, and create a black-and-white layout showing where each one will sit initially, and how much space they'll take up.

You need to do this *before* you actually write copy because space and graphic proximity dictate a great deal of copy.

Your wireframe should show the general size (pixels) and placement of each design element on the page, as well as indicate where the fold is (the spot beyond which most visitors will have to scroll to see more) and where the right side print cut-off is (the outer edge of what can be printed on a standard piece of paper in a standard printer).

Step #5. Copywriting

You'll want to divide copywriting into three steps. The first is your headline because headline copy is critical for landing pages. A slight tweak in verbiage can cause conversions to soar or crash.

You can also change headline copy for various prospect demographics while keeping the rest of the copy on the page pretty much the same.

The headline should refer directly to the place the visitor came from and/or the ad copy that drove the click.

The second most important headline is your call to action *on* the hotlinked text-line and/or submit button itself. You may want to test matching this with your headline, much like a sweater set. Copy tests here can give you the second highest response change.

The third most important copy is the body copy. This is all other copy, including sub-heads, bulleted lists, guarantees, testimonials, explanations and descriptions, etc. According to direct response marketing lore, only 20% of your visitors will read much, if any, of this copy. It still has to be darn good though.

You'll probably go through several rounds of body copy edits when you're working on final landing page design, because almost inevitably when your copy is placed into position, it takes up far more space than you expected. "Can this be said more concisely, yet as effectively?" is the primary question. Copy can be long — but it

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should not use 10 words to explain something when just five would do. More specific tips on copywriting for landing pages further on...

Step #6. Testing, measuring, and tweaking

You should have considered measurements when choosing a host and URLs for the landing page earlier. Now you need to set up a schedule to actually examine and react to results metrics. These should match your goals. Examples:

- eCommerce — Sales as a percent of total visitors, sales by traffic source, average sale amount, average lifetime value of new customers (do they buy again later), percent of sales from returning customers versus newbies, etc.
- Lead generation — Leads as a percent of total visitors, estimated sales value per average lead generated by traffic source, length of sales cycle for average lead, "heat" of average lead (aka readiness to purchase), coupon redemption rate, etc.
- Branding/education — Percent of total visitors who stay longer than 30 seconds, the percent over one minute. Average visit time, pageviews and clickpaths of visitors who stay over one minute. Percent of visitors who return within seven days. Percent of visitors who interact (play games, enter sweeps, post to message board, answer survey, take poll) versus viewers. Results of brand awareness and purchase intent study, etc.
- Relationship — Opt-ins (or RSS-feed recipients) as a percent of total incoming visitors. Percent of return versus one-time visitors. Average dollar-value of ultimate sales made to consumers in a relationship with you versus those who are not. Length of lifetime of relationship, etc.
- Membership — Length of active member account lifetime (churn rate), new members as a percent of total visitors, returning former members as a percent of total visitors. If offering a free trial, the percent of paid conversion and lifetime value of the trial based on landing page and traffic source, etc.
- Viral outreach — Emails per visitor generated by the email tool (ecards or tell-a-friend tools), percent of the outgoing emails resulting in friends visiting, viral growth curve (visitors per week charted over time), number of link-backs from Blogs, message boards and other viral mentions. Estimated value of the viral reach itself — how does this outreach result in aiding the bottom line in the end and how does it compare to other traffic sources in value per visitor?

5 Big Mistakes in Landing Page Design

We'll detail each angle of design and creative further in this Handbook. But first, take a minute now to see if you make any of the big obvious mistakes.

Mistake #1. Hard-to-read type.

Your headline is probably big enough, but is your body copy? We're stunned at how many landing pages use fonts smaller than 10 points for copy. And you think a single visitor will read it? See Chapter 2 for more rules of thumb on typeface, font and copy layout.

Mistake #2. Navigation bar from your regular Web site.

If you give people links to click on, inevitably some of them will click on them. There's next to no chance that any of them will click back again to the landing page. And, since the rest of your site is probably not designed as a hard-hitting conversion device, you've lost that sale completely. This is a shame, because that was probably one of your more-likely-to-convert prospects.

Even if they don't click on your navigation bar, some visitors will inevitably look at it. You have eight seconds or less to convince visitors not to bail on your page completely. Why are you wasting any eyeball time on a visual element that's completely unrelated?

Mistake #3. Click here to start the conversion process.

Every hurdle you make visitors leap over reduces your total conversions.

So don't stick a bunch of convincing copy on the page and end with "Click here to accept..."

If you have an offer, give them a way to start accepting the offer right away. Put the registration form on the landing page itself, or at least the first form field or two. Yes, even eretailers should be testing this instead of just an "add to cart" icon.

Mistake #4. Scary forms.

Most online registration forms are ugly and intimidating. Marketers ask for too much information (fax number?!), and forget to reassure visitors about what will happen to their contact data once entered. (Go look at one of your own landing pages, is there any reassuring copy immediately next to the box where you ask for email address or phone?)

Mistake #5. Copy and graphics unrelated to the offer.

Particularly in business-to-business, marketers find the urge to add a paragraph or two of copy about their products or services irresistible. It's as though you think "Now that I've captured the prospect's attention, why not toss in a commercial for our product above the white paper sign-up form?" Since prospects have the attention span of fruit flies, you've lost them.

The same applies to clip art, navigation bars, pointless blocks of color and other graphics your designer may toss in to "dress up the page." Anything that serves to distract the visitor's eye can very well be the kiss of death for their conversion.

Bonus Mistake. Landing pages that don't match campaign creative.

Last month a marketer for a household name brand explained to us very earnestly, "We can only afford one landing page per year, so I use it for all my online campaigns."

Folks, a basic HTML landing page with your logo, a hero shot of the offer, a bit of copy and an offer acceptance form can cost less than \$500. Toss in half a day of extra programming and your page's headline can change automatically based on what search engine term the visitor came from. This is not rocket science. It's not hours of work. You can outsource basic pages to a cheap freelancer.

Overall the more your landing page resembles your creative — the thing that made them respond in the first place — the better your conversions will be. Creative disconnects and generic landing pages that serve multiple campaigns or purposes equal microscopically small conversions. By the way, yes, this is why you can never use your home page as your landing page unless it's been designed to serve nearly exclusively with that focus.

Example: Here to inspire you is a sample of one of our favorite campaigns from the landing page team at Gap Inc.'s, which owns Old Navy, direct response division. They create at least four-five new landing pages for various targeted campaigns per week.

Sample 1.1 Old Navy "Rugby Bunch" Email



[Privacy Policy](#) | [Update Preferences](#) | [Unsubscribe](#)

Sample 1.2 Old Navy "Rugby Bunch" Landing Page



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How to Write URLs

Before you get on with the rest of the Handbook, let's quickly review the critical element that gets visitors to your landing page to start with — the URL.

Rule of thumb: Every landing page should have a readable and fairly easy to type URL, even if you are counting on online ad or emailed links to bring in traffic.

"Readable" means that it's not a string of gobbledygook. For example, this is a terrible URL (slightly changed to protect the perpetrator) —

<https://j.ovm1.net/wch1/brandnamecs/Default.aspx?C=918&P=0057332000046&S=01>

Readable also means distinct words in your URL should be capitalized in your creative. Example, instead of www.landingpagehandbook.com, you'd put www.LandingPageHandbook.com.

"Easy-to-type" means that it's not a string of gobbledygook, and that it doesn't have any words that are commonly misspelled or strings of numbers longer than five characters.

Plus, you should avoid dashes, odd characters, and if possible, don't put anything *after* the ".com". That's because most people are lazy when typing. They know once they get to ".com" the URL will take them someplace, so why bother typing more?

For example, www.brandname.com/landingpage will result in more visitors to your home page and fewer to your landing page. However, www.landingpage.brandname.com will get more visitors to the landing page instead of your generic home page.

Why should you care about reading and typing?

After all, unless your ad appears offline, people are clicking on hotlinks so they're not reading or typing, right? Wrong. If your link is in email, there's an increasing chance the graphic's been disabled and the recipient will have to cut-and-paste or hand-type in your URL. If your link is in an online ad, IAB studies show there's a good chance you'll have a "view through" — where a significant percent of responders visit your site on their own later rather than clicking immediately.

And if your ad is in search results, searchers often review your visible URL to decide whether to click at all.

Example: Don Crowther, of Breakthrough Consulting, tested Google ads displaying PressReleaseInfo.com versus 101PublicRelations.com. The former pulled a 50% higher click rate than the latter. Best of all, the landing page conversion rate held steady. That meant Crowther got more buyers, not just more traffic.

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Here are some specific tips for URLs for offline campaigns:

Direct postal mail — Consider including the prospect's name in the landing page URL. People always want to learn about themselves. Instead of including a promotional source code in the body of the URL (such as www.offer.brandname.com/14576h), consider creating separate landing pages for each source or asking folks to fill in their "personal secret code" in the registration form to win a prize.

Radio — Buy every typo and alternate spelling for your URL that you possibly can and have them redirect to the right place. Consider launching special URLs for region "SaltLakeBraSale.com" or by station name "Brasale.wxyz.com." Also, add a big fat director in the center of your home page — something that says "Radio listeners click here" both textually and visually — to catch traffic that goes home by mistake.

TV — ditto.

Print ads — Don't stick a URL in small type at the very bottom of the ad and call it a direct response campaign. It's not. It's a brand awareness campaign with a tiny useless URL tacked on. If landing page traffic is the point, then build the ad creative with the URL as the central focus.

After They Convert — Tips for Thank You Pages

Almost every landing page conversion ends in a thank you page, yet they are the most under-utilized elements of the campaign.

Thank you page creative is usually nothing more than a simple confirmation that an action has occurred. That's a true waste, when these pages are, by definition, seen by highly qualified prospects or buyers for your products and services. Studies have shown that consumers really pay attention to your thank you page. They are in prime reading and interacting mode at this moment in time. Why not take advantage of it?

White Paper Thank Yous

1. If someone has just submitted their information in exchange for a white paper, they are only part of the way towards a relationship with you. Chances are, they wanted the white paper and only submitted their information because they had to.

The Thank You page is an opportunity to get closer. Use the space to promote your newsletter or a webinar. Highlight an executive interview or a case study. Tell a specific story to get them engaged. Simply sending them to the

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home page may work, but only if your home page features interesting information. Marketing superlatives about your newest product won't work.

2. As above, this is an excellent place to launch a small applet asking for the user's feedback. You can either mine for marketing info, like their title, or try to engage them. For example, get their vote on a poll that will be featured in your next newsletter. The challenge is to make the interaction interesting for the user. An innovative interaction will stick in their minds. Anything less is just another piece of Internet flotsam.

Registration or Sweepstakes Thank Yous

1. They've registered, but they still haven't converted. In fact, they may not know or care much about your product. The Thank You page for the registration process is a prime opportunity to capture their interest beyond the contest.
2. Make the product/offer the primary message of the page. While you're letting people know that the registration process is over, and thanking them, make sure the main campaign goal is front and center.
3. Give them several options for more information, and offer different kinds of information for readers at various levels.

Sample 1.3 Anritsu Thank You Page

Anritsu Discover What's Possible™

**Weighs 80% less. Costs 40% less.
Delivers 100% of the performance you need.***

**Actual size is 12 x 7 x 2.4 inches.
Actual weight is 6.4 pounds.**

Introducing the world's first 100 kHz-7.1 GHz handheld portable spectrum analyzer. With a big bright screen and built-in smart measurements, you give up nothing to get more accurate metrics in the field, more efficient monitoring inside the lab, and the broad range and fast sweep speeds demanded for spectrum monitoring and surveillance.

To Find Out More:
[Download the MS2721A product brochure.](#)
[Download the Must-Have Wireless Reference Guide.](#)
[Browse the MS2721A product page.](#)

To see the iPod Sweepstakes rules, visit www.anritsu.com/sweepstakes

*compared to Agilent ESA-E (5404E)

Thank you!
 We've entered your name for a chance to win the iPod Mini.
 Good luck in the drawing!

"Out of the box, this battery powered gem can show RF signals over a continuous band that extends from 100-kHz VLF all the way up to microwave frequencies at 7.1-GHz."
 --eXpress, 6/30/04

This example takes advantage of several best practices. It makes the product the star of the Thank You, and uses a testimonial quote integrated graphically with the Thank

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You to refocus visitors to the offer. It also offers several different types of information about the product.

Sample 1.4 iunctura Thank You Page

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