



# Wroe Alderson: father of modern marketing

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to show that Wroe Alderson’s contributions to marketing thought earn him recognition as the “Father of Modern Marketing.”

**Design/methodology/approach** – An extensive review of writings by and about Alderson, a thorough examination of the history of marketing thought literature, and the personal remembrances of one of the authors, are drawn upon to organize Alderson’s numerous contributions to the marketing literature into a small number of categories. Such an organization is expected to provide a big picture overview of Alderson’s significant impact on marketing thought.

**Findings** – Alderson’s contributions to the marketing discipline can be organized into three broad categories, which collectively produced a tectonic shift in academic thinking about marketing: from distribution (macro) to marketing management (micro); from economics to the behavioral sciences; and from description and classification to explanation and theory building. These epic transformations have become so embedded in the marketing literature that they are now taken for granted, but they are so significant they represent a paradigm shift in marketing thought. Because of this legacy, the authors argue Wroe Alderson has earned the honorific title: “Father of Modern Marketing.”

**Practical implications** – This work provides an historical context to understand the origins of modern marketing thought by recognizing the most dynamic marketing thinker of the last half-century.

**Originality/value** – This paper organizes the many and varied contributions of Wroe Alderson into broad categories in a context that is useful for researchers studying the history of marketing thought. The organization of Alderson’s contributions also provides an historical foundation for scholars working on a general theory of marketing.

**Keywords** Marketing theory, Marketing

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Introduction

A half-century has passed since Alderson’s path breaking book *Marketing Behavior and Executive Action (MBEA)*, regarded as “unquestionably the most fully developed theoretical exposition of marketing up to that time” (Bartels, 1988, p. 238). Both Alderson’s prior and subsequent writings have also had a powerful impact on the discipline. Consequently, Alderson’s work has probably been more scrutinized, dissected and analyzed than any other scholar in the discipline (e.g. panels and articles on Alderson’s work in the reconstituted AMA Winter Educators’ “Theory Conference” in 1979 and 1980, and the biennial Conferences on Historical Analysis and Research in Marketing (CHARM) from 1983 to the present). With the decline of PhD seminars in the history of marketing thought and the development of marketing theory, fewer young



academics have heard of Alderson let alone read his work. Hopefully the recent dedication of a legacy volume devoted to Alderson (Wooliscroft *et al.*, 2006) and this special issue of the *European Business Review* dedicated to Alderson's contributions will help to remedy this oversight.

The purpose of this work is to organize Alderson's contributions into categories that represent a dramatic shift or transformation in thinking about marketing. Taken together, the totality of these transformations represents a paradigm shift in marketing thought that we argue earns Wroe Alderson the honorific title "Father of Modern Marketing." This paper starts with a brief biography of Wroe Alderson, and then proceeds to identify three vital changes which he brought about. These transformations in thought were:

- (1) from a distribution (or macro) orientation to a marketing management (or micro) focus;
- (2) from a dominant reliance on economics to a broader behavioral sciences perspective; and
- (3) from an emphasis on description and classification to explanation and theory building.

Following discussion of each, these three shifts in marketing thought are integrated into an Aldersonian functionalist theory of marketing management. The paper concludes by discussing the legacy Alderson bequeathed to the discipline of marketing.

### **Brief biography**

Wroe Alderson's life itself is full of intriguing transformations. Born in St. Louis in 1898, he dropped out of grade school and left home at an early age. For some time he was a hobo, traveling the railroads. During World War I, he served in the Army as a clerk/typist, and directly after that war he was a lumberjack and held a number of part time jobs. He studied at what is now Central Washington University and played varsity football until dropping out, later enrolled at George Washington University, and graduated in 1925 with a degree in economics and statistics. Two years later he married Elsie Wright, to whom he wrote books of love poems, and with whom he produced three children (Wooliscroft, 2006).

Alderson worked at the Department of Commerce, under Secretary (later President) Herbert Hoover, writing several influential reports on distribution costs. In 1936, he moved to Philadelphia to join the Curtis Publishing Company, a National Leader in Marketing Research. Alderson published an article in the *American Marketing Journal*, forerunner of the *Journal of Marketing*, and he published in the first volume of *JM* as well. He became a Quaker in 1939 and peacefully contributed to the war effort in 1943 by working at the Office of Price Administration under Robert E. Sessions who reported to John Kenneth Galbraith. In 1944, he started his own consulting firm which the following year became Alderson and Sessions. The firm rose to national prominence with such well-known clients as: Dupont, Standard Oil of New Jersey (now Exxon), J. Walter Thompson, the Rockefeller Foundation, The Advertising Research Foundation, US Rubber, and Wanamaker's Department Store, to name a few (Wooliscroft, 2006).

Alderson served as President of the American Marketing Association in 1948. He was the driving force behind the marketing theory seminars that lasted from 1951 to 1965. He served as a Visiting Professor at MIT in 1953, taught briefly at several other universities,

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and was on the faculty of the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania from 1959 to 1965. Along the way he was instrumental in helping to found in the Marketing Science Institute in 1962. He also won a number of academic distinctions, including the Parlin Award for his “Distinguished Contribution to Marketing” (1954), the Converse Award (1955, 1967) (Converse, 1921) for his “Contributions to Marketing Science”; and for his practical work on distribution cost analysis he was inducted into the Distribution Hall of Fame (1953). While hosting some of his doctoral students on Memorial Day 1965, Alderson suffered a heart attack and passed away. This brief synopsis barely scratches the surface and obviously cannot do justice to Alderson’s full and varied range of activities or his unsurpassed influence on the people around him. (For a fuller appreciation of this extraordinary life, see Wooliscroft, 2006.)

### **From distribution (macro) to marketing management (micro)**

Alderson played a major role in the discipline’s shift from a distribution orientation that sought to explain how markets move goods from producers to ultimate consumers, to an organizational perspective that sought to understand the problem solving behavior that creates those markets. The distribution orientation was inherent in the three “traditional” schools of marketing thought that dominated the marketing discipline from the turn of the twentieth century until the mid-1950s: functions, institutions, and commodities (Bartels, 1988). One of the main contributions of the distribution approach was to assert the economic and social value created through marketing activity, which had long been stigmatized as an inefficient adjunct to farming and manufacturing (Jones and Shaw, 2002). From this body of work emerged an understanding that economic specialization extends to marketing effort, allowing marketing functions to be organized among market participants (institutions) to increase efficiency of the overall process of matching supply with demand.

While the distribution approach dominated marketing thought in the first half of the twentieth century, it had only a limited capacity to address more managerially-oriented problems. Alderson pioneered in addressing such issues, starting with an article in 1937, which he later described as presenting “elements ... which are held to be particularly important to marketing managers” (Alexander *et al.*, 1953, p. 798). Alderson was also a key author of several chapters of the 1940 book *Marketing* (Alexander *et al.*, 1949, 1953), which represented one of the earliest attempts at identifying “problems of marketing management.”

With the publication of *Marketing Behavior and Executive Analysis (MBEA)* in 1957, the distribution approach was brushed aside when, according to Bartels (1988, p. 178) “Alderson with one sweeping stroke created a new pattern for considering marketing.” Shifting the unit of analysis from the market to an individual organization provided the dynamic for the marketing management school of thought (Bartels, 1988, p. 178; Shaw and Jones, 2005, p. 257) (similarly, Alderson’s household perspective contributed to the consumer/buyer behavior school of thought). Alderson’s approach to marketing sought to explain why marketing was performed in the first place, and how it could be made to perform better.

Marketing Management takes the seller’s perspective in “how to” manage the marketing activities of a business firm. In the same year as *MBEA*, Howard (1957) also wrote a marketing management text. In comparing these two marketing managements books, Bartels’ (1988, pp. 178-9) observes:

Alderson's work departs most from previous traditional texts and at the same time advances thought toward the elaboration of marketing management which was to follow ... While Alderson exploded his new concepts, in the same year John R. Howard published a work less startling ... Although innovative, Howard's book did not much stretch the conceptual fibers of marketing thought.

In the following year, Kelley and Lazer (1958) produced a readings book on marketing management. These books coincided with the publication in 1959 of the Ford Foundation and Carnegie Foundation reports calling for greater relevance in business education.

It was McCarthy's (1960) "4P's" mnemonic for the marketing mix that catapulted his textbook to the forefront of all undergraduate marketing texts and created the rapid growth of the "marketing management" genre. To meet the growing demand, new marketing management textbooks were published year by year, including, chronologically: Buskirk (1961), Britt and Boyd (1963), Stanton (1964), Jones (1964), Zober (1964), Alexander and Berg (1965), Staudt and Taylor (1965), Buell (1966) and Kotler (1967). Thus, within a decade after Alderson's, 1957 publication of *MBEA*, supported by the continuing development of marketing management texts and the foundation reports, there was a revolution in undergraduate education in marketing. Entry-level college textbooks titled *Marketing Principles* went into decline, while those titled *Marketing Management* enjoyed rapid growth, and marketing management now constitutes the largest school of marketing thought (Shaw and Jones, 2005).

Despite his prominent role in transforming marketing from a distribution to a marketing management orientation, Alderson never lost concern with the macro level impact of management behavior on society. For example, in *MBEA* he expressed concern with marketing's impact on "the habitability of the environment" (1957, pp. 464-7) and devoted a chapter to a policy discussion of the "Relations between households, enterprises and the public system" (1965, Chapter 14).

### **From economics to behavioral sciences**

Another important transformation that can be attributed in large part to Alderson was that of opening marketing to the full spectrum of the behavioral sciences. Prior to Alderson's impact on the marketing discipline, economics was viewed as the dominant theoretical underpinning of marketing. In contrast, Alderson's (1957, pp. v-vi) work drew "upon such varied fields as sociology, psychology, anthropology, and political science for elements of a theory."

A focus on the behavioral sciences run throughout Alderson's writings. For example, in analyzing *Cost and Profit Outlook*, the Alderson and Session's consulting newsletter, Dawson and Hugh (1979, p. 212) note that "22 of the 102 issues" describe "Alderson's evolution" in thinking about consumer behavior. In an early article titled "Foundations of marketing science" Alderson (1949, p. 2) recognized that the foundations for understanding consumer motivation were "economics, social psychology and cultural anthropology." Observing that "most individual consumers or consumer buyers are members of a small social unit, the conjugal family or household," Alderson (1957, pp. 175-76) shifted focus from "economic man" to the social dynamics of a household:

Compatibility must start with the husband and wife who established the family and who are responsible for its survival. A truly compatible couple is sexually well adjusted, takes a

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mutual pride and pleasure in the children ... and has a reasonably ... congenial behavior. The last condition ... will suffice if they can agree on the appropriate balance between solitary pursuits and those they engage in together or as members of a larger group. Compatibility also implies relative freedom from negative effects on the satisfaction of the other. Either may bring to the marriage habits or mannerisms which are extremely distasteful to the spouse ... [T]raits drawn from the subcultures of different ethnic and neighborhood groups can reveal distressing contrasts under the strains of daily living.

This single paragraph reveals his concern with psychology, social psychology, sociology and cultural anthropology and their impact on small group dynamics.

Alderson's foray into the behavioral sciences was followed by an influx of thinkers from psychology, social psychology and sociology into the marketing discipline. Several subsequent marketing scholars developed theoretical models of consumer-buying behavior (Nicosia, 1966; Engel *et al.*, 1968; Howard and Sheth, 1969). By the early 1970s there were several multidisciplinary reading books (Kassarjian and Robertson's (1968) *Perspectives in Consumer Behavior*; Holloway *et al.*'s (1971) *Consumer Research: Contemporary Research in Action*; and Cohen's (1972) *Behavioral Science Foundations of Consumer Behavior*). When the interdisciplinary *Journal of Consumer Research* began publication in 1974 the cross-disciplinary approach covering all aspects of the behavioral sciences was legitimized for studying marketing.

### **From classification to theory building**

The third major transformation in marketing thought in which Alderson was the guiding force, was a shift from description and classification of marketing phenomena to explanation and theory building. This is evident in the subtitles of his two most important books. *Marketing Behavior and Executive Action* (1957) is subtitled "A functionalist approach to marketing theory." Similarly, *Dynamic Marketing Behavior* (1965) bears the subtitle "A functionalist theory of marketing." Alderson's concern with marketing theory preceded his 1948 *Journal of Marketing* article (with Reavis Cox) titled "Toward a theory of marketing." Emphasis on theory as a guide for practice was a recurrent theme during his entire consulting and academic career. Alderson's leadership role in theory development has been widely acknowledged (Hollander, 1958; Sass, 1982). For example, Barksdale (1980 p. 3) notes:

Since, Alderson was a major creator of marketing theory, it is not surprising that he was also an enthusiastic promoter of theory development ... I think he understood better than any of his contemporaries the importance of developing the theoretical side of the subject.

In a presentation at the second of his marketing theory seminars, Alderson (1952, p. 119) explored developments outside the field that he believed were coalescing to create a "general science of human behavior" based on an "integration of the social sciences"; and his concern was its "application in marketing." The general science that ultimately developed was termed General Systems Theory (VonBertalanffy, 1951; Boulding, 1956), and Alderson rolled it into his functionalist framework. Indeed, Alderson's descriptions of functionalism make it virtually indistinguishable from General Systems Theory. For example, "The functionalist approach to marketing theory begins with the study of organized behavior systems" (1957, p. 32); "in this writer's particular version of functionalism there is the emphasis on systems, ... and functionalism looks at a systemic structure to determine the present relationship between inputs and outputs"(1965, p. 11).

Alderson recognized that his theoretical orientation was a break with the past and he discussed the perceptual difficulties that had to be overcome. Unfortunately, both marketing educators and marketing practitioners were reluctant to use the term “theory” (1957). In academia, a theoretical approach to markets or marketing was regarded as the province of economists. The work of marketing faculty was to offer “a detailed descriptive treatment of marketing institutions and processes in a manner not covered by economics” (1957, p. 4). Practitioners avoided the word theory to avoid appearing pretentious or impractical.

Owing in no small measure to his Herculean efforts, Alderson (1957, p. 3) observed the growing “interest in theory in the field of marketing.” Without crediting himself, Alderson identifies the 1946 AMA Special Conference on Theory, held in Pittsburgh (of which he was chief promoter), as a turning point in moving marketing towards a theoretical foundation. Another milestone was a 1950 book of essays, *Theory in Marketing*, by Cox and Alderson (1950), and with rising interest a second version of *Theory in Marketing* was published by Cox *et al.* (1964).

Alderson (1957 pp. 3-4) noted: “Beginning in 1951, a group interested in marketing theory has held a week-long seminar year after year.” The meetings were hosted, in alternate years, by Edmund McGarry and Leo Aspinwall, again Alderson was the driving spirit. Rotating between the University of Colorado and University of Vermont, these seminars were held annually for a decade and a half, until Alderson’s death in 1964. The theory seminars had a profound influence on generations of marketing scholars. As Sheth *et al.* (1988, p. 86) described them:

These “invitation only” seminars were used by Alderson to both encourage those present to think of marketing in conceptual ways and develop marketing theory, and also to develop and explain the functionalist approach to marketing. By his own powerful intellect and his dominating personality, he was clearly “in charge” of these seminars and put his stamp on the introduction of a formal-theory approach to marketing science.

No other scholar in marketing has had a more powerful effect on developing and diffusing theory as the scientific basis for the marketing discipline than Wroe Alderson. He was recognized for his “contributions to marketing science” by his peers twice, in 1955 and posthumously in 1967.

Taking these three great transformations in marketing thought, from distribution (macro) to marketing management (micro), from economics to the behavioral sciences, and from classification to theory building, the next section illustrates how these theoretical parts fit into a conceptual whole. A caveat on some limitations of Alderson’s theory is in order. Only a rudimentary partial theory of the marketing system is described below. A general theory of the marketing system would require systematically integrating a sub-theory of marketing management with sub-theories of household buying, market transactions and transactions, channel conflict and cooperation, and the dynamic impact of the marketing system upon the macro socio-economic environment and its reciprocal impact upon marketing structure, process and function. The present discussion is limited to just one aspect of such a general theory of marketing – Alderson’s theory of marketing management.

### **A functionalist theory of marketing management**

Alderson’s epic transformations of the marketing discipline come together in what might be termed a functionalist theory of marketing management. In this theory Alderson (1965, p. 302) argues:

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Marketing as a field of study does not rest comfortably under the label of applied economics ... marketing [academics] are working in an applied segment ... of a general science of human behavior.

Alderson (1957, p. 101) includes the economic theory of the firm, particularly as expressed in Chamberlin's (1933) "Monopolistic Competition" and Clark's (1940) "Economics of differential advantage". However, he emphasizes that these economic theories are necessary, but not sufficient for a theory of marketing. Consequently, he also incorporates systems theory, organizational behavior, anthropology and social psychology. He especially includes cultural ecology, which is concerned with the adjustment of organized behavior systems to changes in their dynamic environments. A point of clarification, Alderson's (1957, p. 16) "functionalist approach" in contemporary terminology is most closely related to general systems theory because it "stresses the whole system and undertakes to interpret the parts in terms of how they serve the system". To describe the fundamental elements of his theory, Alderson (1957, p. 1) coins the term "organized behavior systems." The two organized behavior systems of primary interest to Alderson are households (which accumulate goods to sustain their lifestyles), and firms (which either produce or distribute products and services to survive and grow).

To survive, an organized behavior system must continuously adapt to both the needs of its members and to changes in the environment. An important environmental adaptation mechanism is the market, which exists to match the diverse input requirements of buyers with the differentiated output of sellers.

With heterogeneity the norm on both sides of the market, buyers and sellers adapt by engaging in a double search process to match a seller's small source of supply with a buyer's small segment of demand. Seeking a match, buyers adapt by identifying and locating sellers with output assortments that will most closely satisfy their input requirements. A household's input requirements are to build a potent assortment of products and services that will satisfy their current and anticipated future lifestyle. Sellers adapt through the sorting process, which includes identifying, targeting and communicating with customer segments and transforming a diverse array of raw materials, component parts, finished products or services into output assortments that buyers will value and purchase.

Survival and growth for an individual firm, in particular, depends on its ability to create a competitive advantage in serving some particular segment(s) of demand. Choice of a profitable demand segment hinges on the firm's capacity to satisfy the input requirements of buyers in the segment. For example, a firm may provide a location more convenient to a certain group of buyers, or it may offer a more attractive price, or a brand may have a more desirable image in the minds of a particular subset of customers. Alderson refers to this match between a segment of demand and the firm's capacity to serve that segment as "market opportunity."

"The term "opportunity" means demand for the particular products or services that the individual firm is prepared to provide," according to Alderson (1957, pp. 355-6), "the correspondence to the concept of the ecological niche ... is obvious." Because every firm is unique in some of its resources and capabilities, it faces a unique set of opportunities in the marketplace. Moreover, the environment is dynamic because opportunities (and threats) tend to proliferate. One firm's success in developing a segment of demand creates opportunities for additional firms possessing different

capabilities to act upon, but it also creates threats to other firms that forces them to react to the changing environment. Thus, change is inherent in the system, simultaneously creating opportunities and threats. To take advantage of a market opportunity, particularly an un-served or underserved segment of demand, a firm must apply marketing effort which Alderson (1957, p. 361) defines as the “marketing mix.”

Alderson (1957, p. 355) finds it advantageous to substitute the terms opportunity and effort for supply and demand, because “they reflect a more dynamic view of the relationship as seen from the marketing organization itself.” Organizing the marketing mix to take advantage of market opportunities is the essence of the marketing management process. Thus, the dynamic mechanism for a firm to survive and grow is through the marketing management process of applying its marketing mix to match market opportunities and thereby finding its niche. A firm will remain successful as long as it offers some advantage to customers who choose its output assortment over its competitors. When the environment changes and the firm no longer serves its customers better than its competitors, the firm is threatened and it must adapt to the new circumstances by modifying its marketing mix or finding other opportunities. If not, it faces extinction. Thus, firms survive and grow in the marketplace based on the actions and reactions of managers in adjusting marketing mixes to match environmental opportunities in an ongoing process that produces dynamic marketing behavior.

### **Wroe Alderson’s legacy**

Ultimately, a scholar’s legacy is measured by the impact of his work on subsequent generations of scholars. Numerous scholars have incorporated or extended Alderson’s concepts and framework. Space permits mention of only a few examples. Bucklin (1965) proposed the principle of speculation as a corollary to Alderson’s (1957) principle of postponement. Bucklin observed that in most traditional channels of distribution, manufacturers modify products at the earliest point in the channel to achieve efficiency by creating economies of scale in mass production. Prophetically, Alderson looked past the manufacturing efficiencies driving traditional channels and proposed postponing modifications to the latest point in the marketing flow. Postponing changes in form, time and place not only reduces the risks and costs of speculative inventories of identical items, but it also allows for greater product differentiation. Thus, postponement achieves economies across the entire length of the channel. Efficiencies are generated not only for the supply chain, but also on the demand side as well; and building to order is also more effective in creating customer satisfaction. Not so obvious in the 1950s and 1960s, postponement describes the phenomena we now call mass customization, such as Dell building computers to customer order. Since, Alderson lived at the dawn of mainframe computers, this was a brilliant insight that anticipated emerging distribution channels based on the information revolution with its now ubiquitous PCs, internet and world wide web.

Hunt and Arnett (2005, p. 453) acknowledge Alderson’s contribution, particularly his “theory of differential advantage of competition” (see previous above), to Hunt and Morgan’s (1995) Comparative (later Resource) Advantage Theory of Competition. In this theory, firms seek comparative resource advantages and/or comparative market position advantages to achieve superior financial performance.

Alderson’s (1965, p. 15) Functionalist framework focused on “the study of small systems,” primarily households and business enterprises”. Other writers, in their quest

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for developing a more comprehensive general theory of marketing, have worked to reconcile Alderson's Functionalism with General Systems Theory. Fisk (1967) demonstrated that marketing can be conceptualized in terms of a hierarchy of systems, where households and firms represent one level of analysis. Interactions can be studied within and among levels, in order to:

... organize the bewildering interrelationships between production, marketing, and consumption into a coherent and unified perspective from the standpoint of the consumer, the marketing channel commander, the business manager, or the social welfare of the nation (Fisk, 1967, p. 11).

Fisk's extension of Alderson is captured and expanded upon by Dixon and Wilkinson (1989), who drew attention to two important system dimensions: process and structure. The process consists of transforming inputs into necessary outputs, while the structure consists of the organized interactions among the system's components that make the transformations possible. The system interacts with others at the same hierarchical level by taking inputs and offering outputs in return. Such interactions are organized within the structure at the next level in the hierarchy (in which the systems serves as an element or subsystem, and so forth). This approach demands careful attention to the distinction between systems and sub-systems and "inputs and outputs" at each level in the hierarchy, leading to a more logically sound framework for integrating disparate phenomena.

Ultimately, Alderson's contribution to subsequent generations of scholars should only grow. Alderson (1965) was prescient in appreciating the significance of search activity, interactive marketing, and substituting the movement of information for the movements of goods and people. The world is still at the dawn of the Information Age. It started with workable mainframe computers in the 1950s, expanded to desktop PCs in the 1980s, but it is only since the mid-1990s that the world wide web, internet, and search engines were integrated. As revolutionary as information technology in marketing now seems, we are only at the dawn of the information revolution. As these technologies continue to evolve, Alderson's work grows more relevant in understanding the importance of information as a clearing mechanism in matching marketing effort to market opportunity.

Moreover, no other scholar in the field has affected so many areas of marketing. Alderson expanded the discipline from a branch of economics to a more panoramic perspective of the behavioral sciences. Alderson's functionalist explanation of marketing shifted the state of science in marketing from classification to theory building. By studying practical problems, Alderson changed the focus of marketing thought from distribution (macro) to marketing management (micro).

Alderson was either founder or a strong influence on the emergence of most of the modern schools of marketing thought: marketing management, marketing systems, consumer, behavior, market exchange, and macromarketing (Shaw and Jones, 2005). Although he has not been widely acknowledged nor given the credit he so richly deserves, his ideas are so embedded in the marketing discipline they are now taken for granted. Therefore, we argue based on his three epic transformations of the marketing discipline that fostered modern schools of marketing thought and caused a paradigm shift in marketing thinking, Wroe Alderson should be credited with the honorific title "Father of Modern Marketing."

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