



An Extended Guide · No. 1897

Receipt Printers, Cash Drawers and Scanners — Getting Them Connected

Wiring and pairing your counter gear, and fixing the common faults

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✓ Check the supported-hardware list before you buy anything

The single biggest mistake I see with counter gear is buying a printer, drawer, or scanner that your POS doesn't officially support. Every system — Square, Clover, Toast, Shopify — publishes a list of the hardware it works with. Check that list first, and most of the headaches in this guide never happen.

Let's get your counter gear talking

Receipt printers, cash drawers, and barcode scanners look intimidating with all their cables and ports, but they follow a few simple rules. Once you know the rules, hooking them up is genuinely easy.

I'm Bill, and I run Bill's Home Tech here in Portage County, Ohio. I've spent 30+ years helping folks get comfortable with their technology, and a good share of that is crawling under counters to sort out why a drawer won't pop or a printer spits out blank paper.

I run my own little shop on Square, so I've wired up this exact gear more than once. The good news: the parts are forgiving, nothing here is dangerous, and almost every fault comes down to one of a handful of simple things we'll walk through together.

★ Nothing here can hurt you

This is all low-voltage plug-and-play gear — no mains wiring, no risk. The worst you'll do is plug a cable into the wrong jack, and I'll show you how to spot that. Take your time and you'll have it running today.

The whole guide, on one page

If you remember only these things, you'll get your gear connected and fix most faults without a call to anyone.

- ❑ Check your POS's supported-hardware list BEFORE you buy a printer, drawer, or scanner — not after.
- ❑ Three ways things connect: USB (a cable), Bluetooth (wireless pairing), and LAN/Ethernet (a network cable). Know which your gear uses.
- ❑ The cash drawer usually does NOT connect to the computer — it plugs into the receipt printer with a phone-style RJ cable and pops when a receipt prints.
- ❑ Thermal printers use heat, not ink. The paper only prints on one side, so load the roll the right way around.
- ❑ A barcode scanner acts like a fast keyboard — it just types the numbers it reads. Most need no special driver.
- ❑ Most faults are small: not paired, paper in upside down, the drawer cable in the wrong port, or Bluetooth dropping out.

✓ One rule to hold onto

When something won't work, don't start buying new parts. Start by checking the connection and the supported-hardware list. Nine times out of ten the gear is fine — it's a cable, a pairing, or a setting.

The three ways your gear connects

Nearly every piece of counter hardware talks to your POS one of three ways. Learn these three and you can set up almost anything.

USB — a cable straight in

A USB cable runs from the device to your register, stand, or computer. It's the simplest and most reliable: plug it in and it's connected. The downside is the cable itself — it ties the device to one spot.

Bluetooth — wireless pairing

Bluetooth links a device to your tablet or phone wirelessly over a short distance. You 'pair' them once, and they remember each other. Great for a scanner you want to carry, but pairing can drop and needs re-doing.

LAN / Ethernet — on your network

A LAN or Ethernet printer plugs into your router or switch with a network cable and gets its own address on your network. This is common for a busy counter or a kitchen printer, because several devices can share one printer. Our guide on the network your register runs on covers this side.

✓ Match the connection to your counter

For a fixed station that never moves, a USB or LAN connection is rock solid. Save Bluetooth for the gear you actually need to be wireless. Fewer wireless links means fewer things to drop out on a busy day.

The cash drawer: it plugs into the printer

This one surprises almost everybody, so let's clear it up first. Your cash drawer usually does not connect to the computer at all.

In most setups the drawer connects to the receipt printer with a cable that looks exactly like a chunky telephone cord — that's an RJ cable, and the port on the printer is often labeled 'DK' or 'drawer'. When the printer prints a receipt, it sends a little pulse down that cable and the drawer pops open. No magic, just a signal.

So the chain is: your POS tells the printer to print, and the printer tells the drawer to open. That's why, if your drawer won't open, the printer is the first place to look — not the drawer.

What this means for you

- The drawer needs a printer in the chain to pop automatically. A few stations drive the drawer another way, but printer-driven is the norm.
- There's usually a manual key or release underneath for when the power is off — find it now, before you need it.
- If the drawer pops but the printer is off, check that the printer has power and is connected; the drawer is only following orders.

! Put the drawer cable in the DRAWER port, not the phone jack

The RJ cable from the drawer looks just like a phone line, and the printer may have more than one similar-looking jack. Plug it firmly into the port marked for the drawer (DK). The wrong jack is the number-one reason a brand-new drawer won't open.

Thermal paper: heat, not ink

Your receipt printer almost certainly uses thermal paper. It has no ink and no ribbon — it prints by heating special paper. That changes two things you need to know.

First, you never buy ink for it. You buy rolls of thermal paper in the right width for your printer (common widths differ, so check your model). When print gets faint, it's usually the roll running low or the print head needing a wipe, not an ink problem.

Second, thermal paper only prints on one side — the heat-sensitive side. If you load the roll backwards, the printer runs, the drawer pops, and the receipt comes out completely blank. It's not broken; the paper is just facing the wrong way.

Loading a roll the right way

- Most printers want the paper feeding off the **BOTTOM** of the roll, with the shiny printable side facing the print head.
- Quick test: scratch the paper with a fingernail. The side that leaves a faint mark is the printable side.
- Many drop-in printers are forgiving — just set the roll in and close the lid. If the receipt is blank, flip the roll over.

✓ Keep a spare roll under the counter

Receipt rolls always run out mid-sale. Keep a spare or two within reach, and store them out of heat and sunlight — thermal paper can fade or darken if it gets too warm.

Barcode scanners: a very fast keyboard

Here's the trick that makes scanners make sense: to your POS, a scanner is just a keyboard that types very fast. It reads a barcode and 'types' the numbers for you.

Because of that, most scanners need no special software. You plug in the USB kind or pair the Bluetooth kind, open the spot where you'd normally type an item's code, scan, and the number appears as if you'd typed it. That's the whole idea.

For this to ring up a product, the barcode has to match an item in your POS. So the real work isn't the scanner — it's adding your items with their barcodes so a scan finds the right product and price. The scanner just reads; your item list does the rest.

USB versus Bluetooth scanners

- **USB** scanners sit in a stand or on a cord at the counter — reliable and no pairing to drop.
- **Bluetooth** scanners let you walk the aisle to scan a shelf, but you pair them first and the battery needs charging.
- Either way, test by scanning into a plain note or search box first — if the numbers appear there, the scanner is working and the issue is your item list.

✓ You may not even need a scanner

Plenty of small shops ring up by tapping items on screen and never buy a scanner. If your product count is small, a tidy on-screen grid can be faster than scanning. Buy the scanner when the item count makes it worth it.

Compatibility: the step that saves the most grief

I'll say it again because it matters most: check that your POS officially supports a piece of hardware before you spend a dollar on it.

Not every printer, drawer, or scanner works with every system. Each POS maker keeps a supported-hardware or compatible-accessories list, and buying off that list is the difference between plug-and-play and a weekend lost to troubleshooting. A great printer that your POS doesn't support is just an expensive paperweight.

The lists also tell you the connection type a device uses with that system — whether a given printer is supported over USB, Bluetooth, or LAN. That one detail decides which cables and which counter layout you need, so read it before you buy, not after the box arrives.

! Bundles are usually the safe bet

Many systems sell hardware bundles built to work together out of the box. They can cost a touch more than piecing it together yourself, but for most owners the guaranteed compatibility is worth it. If you do mix and match, match every piece against the supported list first.

Connecting a receipt printer, step by step

Here's the calm order to hook up a printer the first time. It's the same shape whether you're on Square, Clover, Toast, or Shopify.

- **1. Confirm it's supported** for your POS and note the connection type (USB, Bluetooth, or LAN).
- **2. Power and paper first.** Plug the printer into power, load a roll the right way, and make sure it turns on.
- **3. Make the connection.** Run the USB cable, pair over Bluetooth, or plug the network cable into your router for a LAN printer.
- **4. Add it in the POS.** Open your POS hardware or printer settings and let it find the printer, then follow the prompts.
- **5. Print a test receipt** from the settings screen before your first real sale.
- **6. Hook up the drawer** to the printer's drawer port and test that a printed receipt pops it open.

✓ Do it before opening day, not during a rush

Give yourself a quiet half hour to set this up and run a few test sales. Everything is easier to sort out when there isn't a line of customers watching you crawl under the counter.

Common faults and the quick fix

Almost every problem with this gear is one of a short list. Here's what to check, in order, before you reach for your wallet or the phone.

What's happening	First thing to check
Receipt prints blank	Thermal roll is in upside down
Drawer won't pop	Drawer cable in the printer's DK port
Printer not found	Connection type and that it's powered on
Scanner does nothing	Scan into a note — is it pairing or power?
Bluetooth keeps dropping	Battery charge and distance to the tablet
Faint or patchy print	Roll running low, or wipe the print head

Work top to bottom and you'll clear most of these in a minute or two. The ones that linger are usually Bluetooth drop-outs, which we'll tackle on the next page.

✓ **Change one thing at a time**

When you're troubleshooting, change a single thing and test, then the next. If you swap the cable, flip the roll, and restart all at once, you'll fix it but never know what was wrong — so it'll just happen again.

Two kinds of small business, two setups

What gear you need depends entirely on how you sell. A fixed counter and a market table call for very different hardware — don't buy for a shop if you work from a tote.

If you sell from a fixed counter or shop

You ring people up in one place, on steady power and internet. You can run a full station with a receipt printer, a cash drawer, and maybe a scanner, all wired in and left set up.

- A USB or LAN receipt printer stays put and is the most reliable choice.
- A cash drawer that pops off the printer makes handling cash quick and keeps a tidy record of openings.
- A barcode scanner earns its keep once your item count is large.
- Wire what you can; it's one less thing to drop out during a rush.

If you sell on the go — markets, trucks, house calls

You sell from a booth, a truck, or a customer's doorstep. Power is a battery and the internet is your phone. Gear has to be light, wireless, and quick to pack.

- A small handheld with a built-in printer (like Square Terminal, Clover Flex, or Toast Go) saves carrying a separate printer.
- Skip the cash drawer — a simple zip pouch or an apron is lighter and pops open a lot faster.
- A Bluetooth scanner only if you truly need it; charge it the night before.
- Many vendors print no receipt at all and text or email it instead.

★ Not sure what to carry?

Tell me how and where you sell and I'll help you build a gear list that fits your counter or your tote without buying things you'll never use. Call or text (330) 200-8042.

When Bluetooth keeps letting go

Bluetooth is the convenience that causes the most grey hairs. A scanner or printer that pairs fine, then quits mid-shift, has a few usual culprits.

Bluetooth is a short-range, line-of-sight-ish link, and it shares the airwaves with a lot of other gadgets. Distance, a low battery, and nearby interference are the usual reasons a paired device drops. The fixes are simple once you know where to look.

What to try, in order

- Charge it. A low battery drops the link long before the device looks dead — this is the most common cause by far.
- Keep it close. Shorten the distance between the device and the tablet, and keep thick metal or a microwave out of the line.
- 'Forget' and re-pair. Remove the device in your tablet's Bluetooth settings, then pair it fresh — this clears a confused connection.
- One tablet only. A scanner paired to two tablets will bounce between them; pair each device to a single register.

✓ If it drops constantly, go wired

A device that drops over and over on a busy counter is telling you something. For a station that never moves, switching that piece to USB or LAN usually ends the trouble for good. Wireless is a convenience, not a requirement.

Keeping your gear reliable day to day

A little upkeep keeps counter gear from failing at the worst moment. None of this takes long, and it saves real headaches.

A few simple habits

- Keep spare receipt rolls on hand and swap before a roll runs fully out.
- Wipe the printer's print head now and then with a lint-free cloth; dust and adhesive cause faint print.
- Charge Bluetooth gear overnight, or dock it, so it starts the day full.
- Keep cables tidy and labeled under the counter so you can trace one fast when something unplugs.
- Know where the drawer's manual release key lives, in case the power is out.

Think of it like a car: a few minutes of care beats a breakdown in the middle of a busy Saturday. None of this is technical — it's just not waiting for the gear to quit before you look at it.

✓ A backup plan costs nothing

Even with tidy gear, keep a phone reader or a way to take a payment by hand as a backup. If a printer or station quits, you can still ring the sale and sort out the receipt after.

You don't always need a paper receipt

A receipt printer is handy, but it isn't the only way to give a customer proof of sale. Many owners skip the printer entirely.

Every one of these systems can send a receipt by text or email instead of printing it. The customer taps in their number or address once, and the receipt lands on their phone. No paper, no roll to run out, and a tidy digital trail for both of you.

For a market vendor or a home-service call, digital receipts can make a printer unnecessary — one less thing to carry and charge. For a busy counter, a printer is still faster per customer, so weigh the trade for how you actually sell.

✓ Offer the choice

Ask 'receipt by text, email, or paper?' Most folks are happy with digital, and the ones who want paper still get it. You save on rolls and give customers what they prefer — an easy win.

Buying gear without overspending

You can spend a little or a lot on counter hardware. Here's how to land on what you actually need. (Models and bundles as of late 2026 — confirm current.)

Start from how you sell, not from the fanciest station in the catalog. A market vendor may need nothing but a handheld; a busy shop may want a wired printer, a drawer, and a scanner. Buy for the counter you have, with a little room to grow, and no more.

A sensible order to buy in

- The reader or station to take the card — that comes first, covered in our [card-readers-and-terminals](#) guide.
- A receipt printer and cash drawer next, if you handle cash at a fixed counter.
- A barcode scanner last, once your item count makes tapping on screen too slow.

! Prefer buying outright to leasing

Where you can, buy a printer, drawer, or scanner outright rather than leasing it. Leased counter gear can quietly cost several times its purchase price over a contract. Our [terminal-leases](#) guide covers the traps.

Your opening-day gear checklist

Run through this before your first real sale and you'll start the day with everything working and nothing to scramble over.

- ☐ Every piece of gear is on your POS's supported-hardware list.
- ☐ The receipt printer powers on and a test receipt prints clearly.
- ☐ A thermal roll is loaded the right way, with a spare under the counter.
- ☐ The cash drawer pops open when a receipt prints.
- ☐ The drawer's manual release key is somewhere you'll remember.
- ☐ Any Bluetooth scanner is paired, charged, and scans into a test field.
- ☐ Your items have their barcodes and prices entered so a scan rings up the right product.
- ☐ You've run two or three practice sales start to finish.

★ Want a hand on setup day?

If you'd rather not crawl under the counter yourself, this is exactly the kind of visit I do — I'll wire it all up, test every piece, and show you how to swap a roll and clear a jam. Call (330) 200-8042.

Common mistakes people make

A handful of avoidable slip-ups cause most counter-gear trouble. Now you'll know them before they bite.

- **Buying before checking** the supported-hardware list, then finding the printer won't work with their POS.
- **Loading thermal paper backwards** and thinking the printer is broken when the receipt comes out blank.
- **Plugging the drawer cable into the wrong jack** on the printer, so a new drawer never pops.
- **Leaning on Bluetooth for everything** on a fixed counter, then fighting drop-outs that a USB cable would have avoided.
- **Forgetting the manual drawer key** and being locked out of their own cash when the power blinks.

! The one that costs real money

The expensive mistake is buying unsupported gear. A printer that your POS doesn't list may never work right, and you may not get your money back once it's opened. Check the list first — every single time.

More than one register, or a kitchen printer

Growing past a single counter adds a wrinkle or two, but the same rules apply. Here's what changes when you add stations.

When several registers need to share a printer — or when orders go to a kitchen printer in the back — a LAN/Ethernet printer is usually the answer, because it sits on your network where any station can reach it. That's a job for a tidy, reliable network.

Each station still needs its own reader, and often its own drawer. The printer and the network are what they share. Toast in particular leans on kitchen displays and printers for sending orders back, which is part of why it suits restaurants.

✓ Get the network right first

Shared and kitchen printers only work as well as the network under them. Our guide on the network your register runs on covers keeping that steady and separate — set it up before you add a second station.

When it's worth getting a hand

Most of this you can do yourself. But there's no shame in handing off the fiddly bits — here's when a hand saves you time.

If you've checked the supported list, confirmed the connection, reloaded the paper, and tried the drawer port, and a piece still won't cooperate, that's a fair point to ask for help rather than keep guessing. The same goes for wiring a multi-station or kitchen setup, where a tidy network matters.

Phone support from your POS maker is good for settings and account questions, but they can't see your counter or reach the cable that's half unplugged behind the register. That's where a local hand comes in.

★ I'll come see the actual counter

The thing a help line can't do is stand at your counter and look. I'll trace the cable, test every piece, and leave it working — and show you how to fix the common faults yourself next time. Same day when I can. Call (330) 200-8042.

Setting honest expectations

Counter gear is simple once it's set up, but it isn't entirely hands-off. Knowing what to expect keeps you from being annoyed by normal things.

Expect to swap a receipt roll regularly, charge any wireless gear, and wipe a print head now and then. Expect the occasional blank receipt or dropped pairing — now you know the fix for each. This is normal upkeep, not a sign anything is wrong.

What you should not expect is to fight your gear daily. If you do, something is off — unsupported hardware, a weak network, or a wireless link that ought to be a cable. Steady trouble is a signal to change the setup, not to live with it.

✓ Keep the little manuals

Tuck the quick-start cards for your printer, drawer, and scanner in a folder under the counter. The paper-load diagram and the port labels are exactly what you'll want the day something acts up.

How this fits with the rest of your setup

Your counter gear is one piece of a bigger picture. A quick map of where it connects to everything else.

The reader takes the card — that's our card-readers-and-terminals guide. The network carries printing and payments and should be kept separate from your guest Wi-Fi — that's our guide on the network your register runs on. And when the internet drops, offline mode and a phone backup keep you selling — that's our offline-mode guide.

Your printer, drawer, and scanner sit on top of all that. Get the reader and the network right first, and this gear slots in cleanly on top. Rush the gear before the foundation and you'll chase faults that aren't really the gear's fault at all.

★ One setup, done right

If this is all feeling like a lot of moving parts, that's fair — it is. I can set the whole thing up in one visit so the reader, the network, and the counter gear all work together. Call or text (330) 200-8042.

Common Questions

The questions I hear most about counter gear, answered plainly.

Q: Why is my receipt coming out blank?

Almost always the thermal roll is in upside down. Thermal paper only prints on one side — flip the roll so the printable side faces the print head and try again.

Q: My new cash drawer won't open. Is it broken?

Probably not. The drawer pops when the printer prints, so check that the drawer cable is firmly in the printer's drawer (DK) port, not another lookalike jack, and that the printer has power.

Q: Do I need a special barcode scanner for my POS?

Check your POS's supported-hardware list to be sure, but most scanners act like a keyboard and just work. The real setup is adding your items with their barcodes so a scan finds the right product.

Q: My Bluetooth scanner keeps disconnecting. What do I do?

Charge it first — a low battery is the usual cause. Then keep it close to the tablet, and if it still drops, 'forget' and re-pair it. On a fixed counter, a USB scanner avoids the problem entirely.

★ Still stuck on a stubborn piece?

Counter gear is one of the easier things to fix once you can see it. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042, tell me what it's doing, and I'll either talk you through it or come sort it out in person.

You don't have to figure this out alone

You just have to remember that a friendly, patient person who speaks plain English is one call away.

I hope this guide made connecting your receipt printer, cash drawer, and scanner feel a little less daunting and a lot more doable. Keep it with your other business papers, come back to a page whenever you need it, and don't feel you have to memorize a thing.

When you'd rather have a hand, that's exactly what I do. I come to your shop or your kitchen table, work at your pace, and never make you feel rushed or silly for asking. A first visit is a flat \$99, and for the parts that don't need me on-site I can often help right on your screen for \$49. Every visit comes with a 30-day, come-back-free guarantee. I don't sell payment processing and I earn no commission from any company — so the advice you get is just honest advice. For the tax and legal fine points, I'll point you to your accountant or attorney.

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Three Ways Your Gear Connects

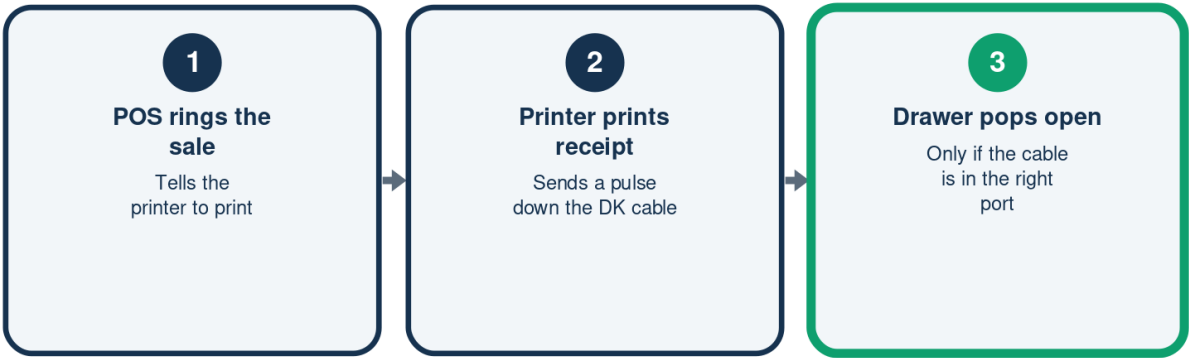
Pick the connection that fits your counter

	Best for	Watch out for
USB cable	A fixed station	Ties to one spot
Bluetooth	Gear you carry	Pairing drops
LAN / Ethernet	Shared printers	Needs a network

Wire what stays put; save Bluetooth for gear that must move.

How the Cash Drawer Pops

The drawer follows the printer, not the computer



No pop? Check the printer and the drawer (DK) port first.

Quick Fixes for the Usual Faults

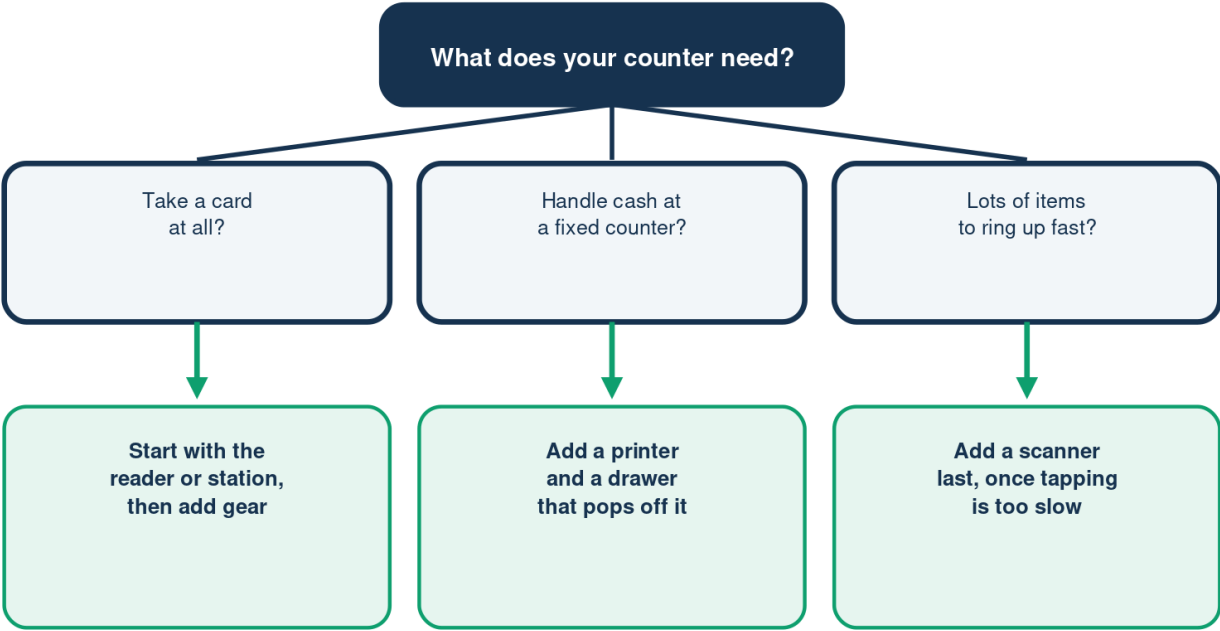
Check these before you buy a new part

	What's wrong	First check
Blank receipt	Roll in	upside down
Drawer won't pop	Cable in	the DK port
Printer not found	Power and	connection
Bluetooth drops	Battery and	distance

Change one thing at a time so you learn what the fault was.

What Should You Buy First?

Start from how you sell, not the catalog



Always check your POS's supported-hardware list before you buy.

Illustration - a schematic, not to scale. Your setup may differ.



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A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill.

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