Drowning in Data but Thirsty for Insight?

Applying Data to Content

by Melissa Mines
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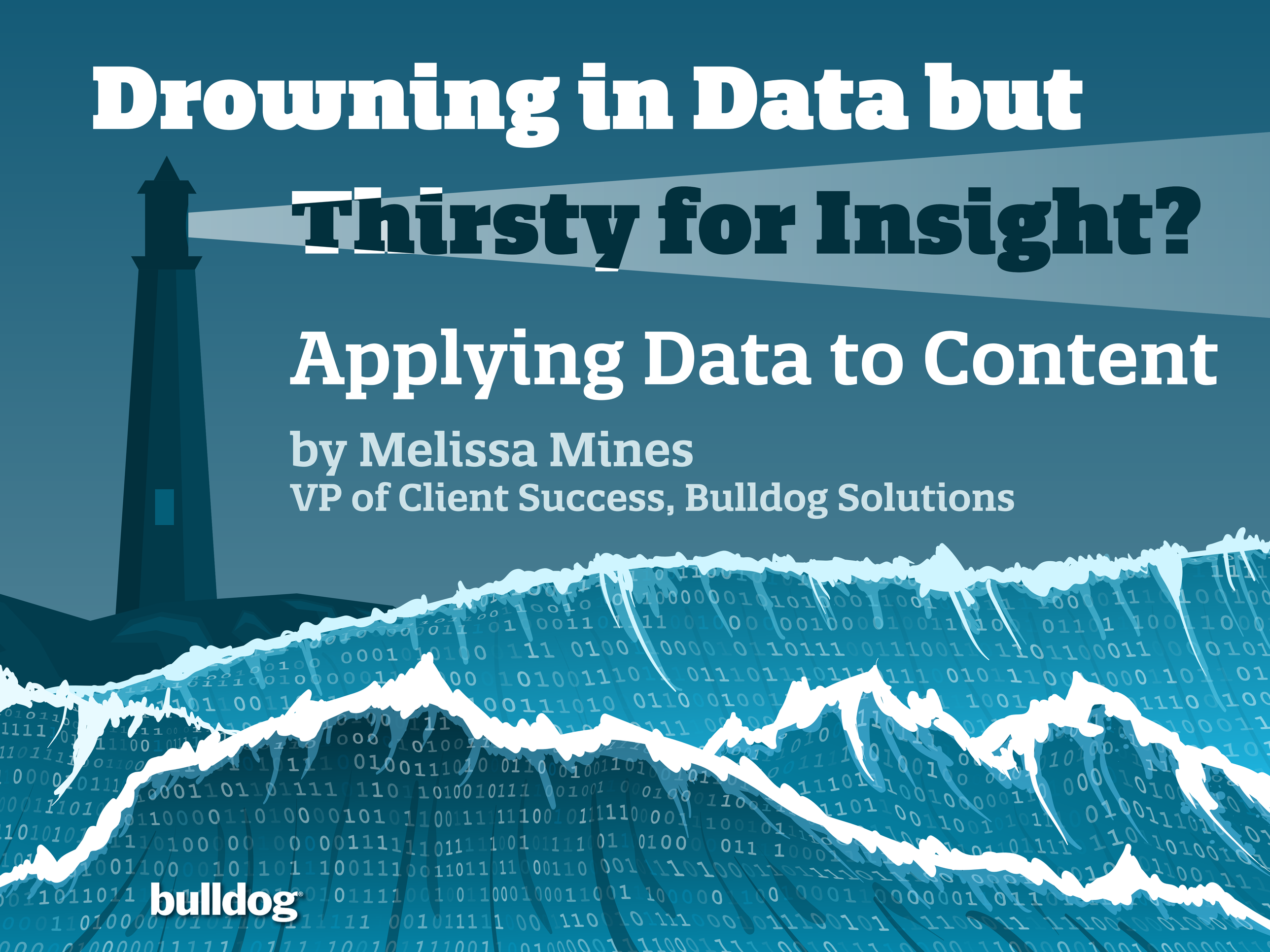

About the Author

Melissa Mines is the VP of client success at Bulldog Solutions, a marketing agency headquartered in Austin. She recently served as Head of Brand Content for Cisco Systems, served as Director of Marketing and Communications for NetSolve, Inc., and was a marketing manager for the 3M Corporation. Her work has been recognized through Kellogg MBA case studies and highlighted in publications such as *The New York Times*.

About This Book

When they named it "Big Data," they weren't kidding. Marketers have more data than ever at their disposal, but turning it into useful insight can seem like an overwhelming task. Dealing with the data deluge is frustrating on its own, and that frustration is compounded by the knowledge that having usable data could help your content team create and promote content that has a real impact on your conversions and revenue.

This eBook covers:

- *How to approach data*
- *How to apply data to content planning*
- *How to get started with data*

Let's dive in.

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The Data Deluge

You're almost certainly aware of the proliferation of data and data sources around you. But you might not realize how much data we're surrounded by, or how fast the total data is growing.

The term "Big Data" came into general usage in 2012. That year, 2.5 exabytes of marketing data were created worldwide. 2017 is on target to create 1.46 zettabytes. That's 584 times as much data than 2012's output—and that doesn't even approach the 16.3 ZB of *total* data to be created this year.

At the end of 2017, the total cumulative marketing data in the world will be 4.4 ZB. That amount will more than double with 2018's expected 5.4 ZB of marketing data.

What does that mean for users? It means that in 2017, *every minute*:

- Google conducts 3.6 million searches
  - Does your content match the search terms your customers use?
- Twitter users send out 456,000 tweets
  - Is your content easily sharable and share-worthy?
- 103.5 million spam emails are received
  - Do your content-promoting emails get opened?

> ***"We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. The world henceforth will be run by synthesizers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely."***
>
> —E.O. Wilson, *The Unity of Knowledge*, 1998

We've asked marketing leaders about their data-related challenges. Some of the most frequent responses include:

- Data siloed within departments or teams
- Data siloed within platforms or sources
- Combining data from different sources without distortions or duplications
- Choosing which data to consider when making strategic decisions
- Using data carefully, to nurture leads rather than overwhelming or ignoring them
- Working with small slices or segments of data
- Taking the numbers from data and converting them to practical actions

A Three-Step Framework for Approaching Data

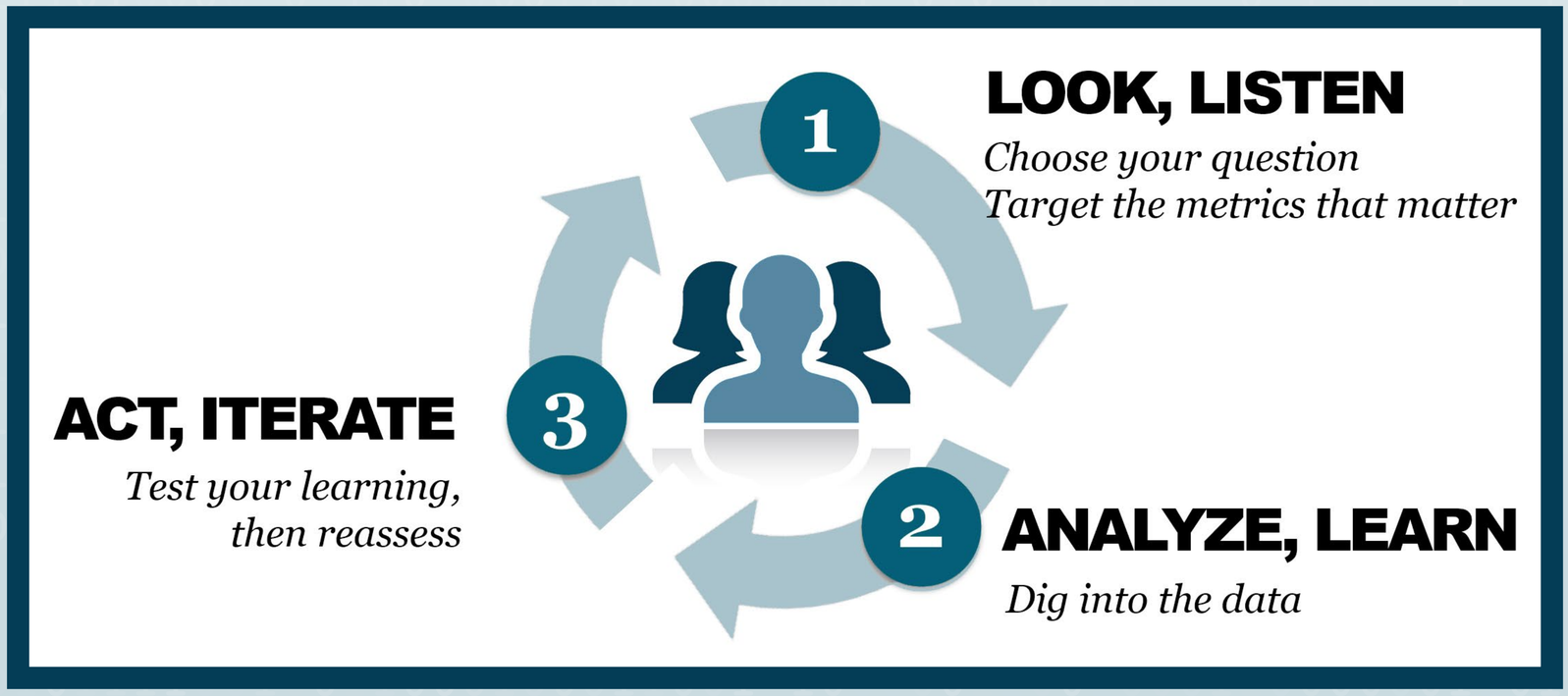
Step 1: Look and Listen.
Break your desired outcomes into a series of single-focus questions that can be answered through data. Using your own insight and that of your team, form a hypothesis to test the aspect specified in the question. "Begin with the end in mind" applies here, as long as the end you're seeking is an accurate answer to your question rather than a *particular* answer.

Step 2: Analyze and Learn.
Develop a plan to test each hypothesis individually, as independent from other factors or changes as possible in the real world. Before testing, make sure you're tracking the relevant metrics consistently and accurately. Once you've gathered the resulting data, analyze the results.

Step 3: Act and Iterate.
Use the data you gathered during Step 2 to inform your next question(s) for your data. View your team's progress through the lens of an Agile framework, where the ultimate goal is improving the process itself and it's understood that the testing environment (the market) is constantly changing.

Following this framework is simple, but not necessarily easy. The most crucial thing to keep in mind when looking at data is this: approach it like a scientist. Bring your questions and hypotheses to your data; don't look at the data first to see what questions it might answer. (Your team can do that later, and it might yield some interesting results, but for strategic matters, put your questions first.)

If the idea of being a scientist isn't appealing, think of acting like a detective. Good detectives begin with a question ("Who has committed this crime?") and use the data sets they have to answer it. By comparison, most depictions of bad detectives show them starting with the most easily accessible evidence and shaping it into a narrative of their own design. Bad detectives are big fans of vanity metrics.



Like interrogations in police shows, interrogating your data is all about directing the right question to the right resource at the right time. For instance, using the traditional sales funnel as a framework for informing general marketing decisions, you can test your hypotheses by directing these questions to these specified data sets:

Trust the Process

The scientific method has served those seeking verifiable information for nearly 500 years. Researchers the world over trust that process, because it begins with a question and seeks an answer, not the other way around. When you apply the scientific method to your own data, you can similarly trust its process, knowing that you're proceeding in the right direction.

Many scientific experiments reach the conclusion of "Hypothesis not confirmed; more research needed," and many detective cases aren't fully resolved and get classified as "cold," which essentially means "more research needed." This is bound to happen to some of your data interrogations, and that's to be expected. Use those experiences to inform the next question(s) you ask, which metrics you're tracking, and even how those metrics are tracked.

Applying Data to Content

Quality content that answers customer questions at the right time can have a significant impact on conversions and revenue, so the ROI of applying data to content can be very high.

Content marketing done well is creating narratives and experiences that connect with your buyers where they are.

Separating this definition of content marketing into its main components reveals outcomes for the process:

- Creating narratives
- Creating relevant experiences
- Connecting with your buyers
- Meeting your buyers where they are

So now let's apply the 3-step framework to these outcomes.

Step 1: Look and Listen

Break your desired outcomes into a series of single-focus questions that can be answered through data. Using your own insight and that of your team, form a hypothesis to test the aspect specified in the question.

Creating narratives requires **content insights:**

- What messages are best suited to different stages along the customer journey?
- Is the storytelling balanced with conversion-oriented signals?
- Are benefits or features more prominent in content?
- Is the educational style appropriate to the audience and industry?
- Is the content consistent with brand qualities?

Creating relevant experiences requires **engagement insights**:

- Which pieces of content have attracted the highest volume of attention?
- Which pieces of content have attracted the most engagement?
- Which pieces of content have prompted sustained user engagement?
- What content formats tend to attract the most attention, engagement, and sustained engagement?

Connecting with your buyers requires **buyer insights**:

- What trends are most relevant to our buyers' industries right now?
- What terms are our buyers searching for?
- What topics come up most often in our buyers' social media posts?

Meeting your buyers where they are requires **buying cycle insights**:

- How much time do our buyers spend in the buying cycle before making a purchase? What stage consumes the most hours for them?
- At what stage are our buyers most likely to abandon the buying cycle?
- What questions do they have throughout the buying cycle? What questions do they still have near the end of the buying cycle?

And **competitive insights** should be a priority throughout the process:

- How do the messages, storytelling, style, and consistency of our content compare to our competitors' content?
- Which of our competitors' content pieces have received the most attention, engagement, and sustained engagement?
- How well does our competitors' content speak to our buyers' current concerns and industry trends?
- Do our competitors anticipate and answer buyers' questions throughout the cycle, and does their online experience encourage conversions/purchases?

Step 2: Analyze and Learn

Develop a plan to test each hypothesis individually. Before testing, make sure you're tracking the relevant metrics consistently and accurately. Gather the resulting data and analyze the results.

Content insights:

These substance-based insights are often best attained through professional analysis, with new technologies adding a machine-driven component. (For more on these new technologies, see the sidebar on page 13.) Remember that qualitative data is still useful data, as long as the source is trusted and trustworthy.

Engagement insights:

Attention volume can be measured through traffic, comments, shares, and social engagements. Yes, we've identified these as vanity metrics, but here they're used as a component of the data-gathering process rather than an end result unto themselves.

Engagement metrics include length of time spent on the page and response to conversion signals, while sustained engagement is often measured by how many other pages were viewed during visits that started with the content.

Buyer insights:

Sources for trend data would include volume by region of online discussions about the topic, while search query data can provide information on popular search terms. Social listening can provide both quantitative data and qualitative analysis, depending on your choice of partner for that function.

Buying cycle insights:

This data can come from both quantitative and qualitative sources. On-site search data can reveal what questions buyers have throughout the buying cycle, while your sales team can tell you what questions buyers still have before they complete the cycle. You can also ask your sales team to include a question or two about how buyers perceived the buying cycle, including their time investment and their overall impression of the experience.

Step 3: Act and Iterate

Use the gathered data to inform your next questions and tests. Remember that incremental improvements can make the most difference, especially in a testing environment that's constantly changing.

Once you've tested hypotheses, gathered data and analyzed the results, it's time to put those learnings into action. Using the insights that you've gathered, you could:

- Map your buying cycle/customer journey
- Match your content assets to each stage in the cycle
- Identify your strongest-performing assets to prioritize for optimization
- Create content to fill gaps in the cycle and create a plan to test and optimize these new assets
- Keep improving your content through testing and iterating
- Organize the optimized assets into campaigns that cover the entire buying cycle – then begin testing these campaigns

Start with the Basics

If you're at Square One, do these things first:

1. **Add Google Analytics codes to your website**
2. **Implement tracking tags for all paid search channels (including conversion and re-marketing tags)**
3. **Set business-oriented performance goals for each data collection system:**
   - Google Analytics: bounce rate, time on site, pages per visit, goal completions
   - Paid Search: cost per lead or acquisition (separating brand from non-brand), return on ad spend

The Future of Data and Metrics

Insight on content substance has historically been provided exclusively by content professionals who use their expertise and experience to evaluate qualitative aspects like educational style and messages in the buyer's journey.

A new era of machine learning and AI will generate data to supplement (*not replace*) human analysis. Google and others are developing content scoring engines with astonishingly sophisticated algorithms that can evaluate "fuzzy" aspects of content.

These engines have up to 500,000 rules to grade content regarding:

- Emotional value
- Authority
- Pipeline velocity
- Storytelling
- Brand identity

As part of your data-driven culture, make sure your team stays up-to-date on these developments.

To start your own voyage from drowning in data to sailing smoothly on it, contact Melissa Mines at Bulldog Solutions.

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