



RETAIL ASSEMBLY : CURATED ONLINE CONTENT



Written by Wendi Chang and Rahul Bajaj
Interview with Jennifer Pilkington

R: So?

JP: "I was listening to this interview with Pharrell, and he was saying it couldn't be a better year because its 2013 and everything is completely different - and things are not in a box. And then he went on to say, 'and if they are, it's like please don't talk to me - I don't want to catch your mentality' [laughs] I love it - don't ever give me or show me the same old, don't ever show me a box. There's good base inside [the box], so use it, but add to it and show me something new and interesting."

That is the challenge Retail Assembly is tackling on two different levels:

1. Within RA, it's how to present the content in an interesting way. Also ensure that it's great, innovative content from people at the top of their game. Aside from learning about a particular aspect of the retail industry, RA wants you to walk away with sparks, ideas, which you can use in your own business.

2. Provide the user a platform to get out of their box. "Ultimately what we want is to allow you to get a really good, really clear understanding of each of the factors affecting your business - and once you've got that, you're golden. You can do whatever you want, because you'll know the implications of everything you want to do. It's powerful stuff."



R: Even so, there are a lot of boxes on the site

JP: Visually, I love boxes, squares, spheres (symmetry) clean. That's what a foundation should be: stable, balanced, simple. Strategically, I like things still clear, but freeform - not boxed - individual, but still clear. That's what everyone should walk away with - a individual idea of what they can do better for their customers, their business, etc.

R: How do you get so clear?

JP: I LOVE wading through the mess to get there. Sometimes I spend too much time there [in the mess].

R: Yeah, the mess is key - its kinda how you guys run the content meetings I've been to. Everyone throws everything on the table, and then edit, and find the links between this person's story and that person's idea. And then it gets edited and organized some more.

JP: Actually, that's how I used to buy [for retailers] too. Show me everything and let me narrow it down to get the customer -and the business- a great delivery. If it makes you feel better, I used to ask my vendors for as much as I ask from all of you.

R: You push everyone farther and they like it.

JP: [laughs] Most of the time.

LIFESTYLE - WORKSTYLE

We're at this great place where technology has given us a freedom and a flexibility where we can accomplish more - almost anywhere. For example, I'm working and sitting on a park bench on a sunny Sunday. It's rumored that part of a RA course was written on a beach in the Caribbean. I've been to many fully functional meetings at the Retail Assembly offices on their patio. And I'm going to finish up the Retail Math workshop I'm taking on the couch with my dog and girlfriend tonight on the couch.

Although they work long and hard, and are fueled by craft coffee like any good big-city-based organization, flexibility and ease of use accent almost every conversation. They seem to understand that people - their users - are busy, that they work, they get out of town, they need downtime with friends and family. The RA team wants to facilitate job/career advancement without letting go of any freedom in life.

FOUNDATION - FUNDAMENTALS

In one of my earliest conversations with Jennifer, she retold this story about about a football coach who held, "like, a dozen" practises without a football. The coach emphasized that in a game, you only have the ball for a very small percentage of the time, and that the team would spend most of their time practising the foundational and fundamental skills of the game. Jennifer was quick to say she believed in practising *with* the ball, but wanted the foundational info in the workshops to be just as solid as those players' skills.



CONNECTIONS - NETWORKS

This is where things get a bit wild at RA, when you ask them about connections. They have these mind maps where the foundational concepts are laid out for any course. Floating outside of that are more detailed ways to execute each concept, and out from that is another layer of innovation. It seems easy enough - three layers. Then you notice the lines drawn connecting foundations to executions to innovations and it just looks like a mess.

But the crazy thing is, when you're going through the content at RA, they are making all these connections for you, but it doesn't seem at all like the maps. It's simple, one small idea carries over to three other areas. Allocating 200 square feet to something means x for your sales plans, y for your customer's experience, z for your purchases, etc. It's seamless, easy.

COMING TOGETHER

"People like people. We like people. And the best part about retail and fashion is that there is no shortage of really stellar people and ideas". Bringing together fashion and retail's best to offer up a case study, a story, a contribution is really important to the organization who values, not just learning the business, but applying it to the future. Insights, a peek into what other businesses are doing, and what's coming down the pipeline are attacked with the same fever as the fundamentals.

Everytime I'm at the Retail Assembly offices, I'm feeling that the retail industry is full of opportunity, and I've probably met someone new. Everytime I speak with Jennifer I have a greater sense of freedom than I had before. All this is despite the fact that I have more work to do than before I arrived, and probably another online retail workshop I want to go through. But that is the power of inspiration.