![OMNI Retail Group logo]

Company Background and Perspectives

John Helm, CTO

OMNI Retail Group was created in late 2013 by pivoting from a company called Vendaria Media, which was founded in 1999 as a technology agency creating custom applications, product demos, and videos that supported e-retailers. Vendaria all but failed during the recent economic crash and the principle VC asked Jennifer Hurshell to attempt a turnaround. She brought in a long time colleague, Joe Barrett; and to keep the story short, they identified one existing offering—creating "usage based product finders" for ecommerce shoppers at retailers—as the potential foundation for a broader solution that could be offered as a contextual product discovery platform to assist the vast majority of shoppers who are not product experts. Hurshell and Barrett acquired Vendaria, and OMNI was chartered with the vision to create emotionally satisfying product discovery experiences for consumers, powered by the world's most authoritative product library. To be "emotionally satisfying" we need to create respectful and effective user experiences that truly help shoppers find what's right for them. So, for example, rather than asking air conditioner shoppers how many BTU/hours of cooling capacity they need, we ask them about how and where they plan to use a cooling unit (with an algorithm that calculates the required BTU rate in the background and maps to the most appropriate air conditioners). Since about 70% of shoppers don't know what a BTU is, this usage directed approach is less intimidating and much more helpful, and mirrors the way expert sales people guide shoppers to the right product by asking usage based questions in the store. Here's an unbranded web example and here's a mobile version; here's one for safes at Costco. For the other 30%, we are working on ways to make the UX adapt to avoid irritating such power users.

The fact that OMNI pivoted from Vendaria makes for a very unique situation. In many ways we are not like a typical startup because we were able to pivot hard and yet hold on to key enterprise customers including Staples, Costco, Home Depot, and Walmart. Since our pivot, we acquired HP, Dell and Toys R Us in the past three months. Moreover, we actually have healthy monthly recurring revenue, which is great, but doesn't yet cover our cash flow requirements. Currently we are 8 people, had a successful seed round, and were currently

November 2015

pitching for our next round; and while we have some legacy infrastructure, the entire data processing back-end must be re-written to support our future product vision. However (!) the real opportunity is to simultaneously build a company and a rather interesting data infrastructure, basically from scratch.

Once one digs in to the data side, several very interesting technical problems reveal themselves, including: taxonomy generation, adaptive schemas, and various data harvesting challenges including image analysis and processing semi-structured and unstructured data with Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools, classifiers, and (probably) other AI techniques for structure discovery. Our vision for the front end and UX requires applying Behavioral Economics and Social Psychology insights to optimize the shopper experience (which we user test on an ongoing basis with real shoppers). The technology platform for implementing all of this is still work in progress.

This brings me to the scariest part. One of the key reasons I joined OMNI is that Jennifer, Joe, and I share a desire to build a company where people want to come to work; and will getter better next jobs because they worked at OMNI. This may be harder than all the NLP and AI problems combined, for how, as a startup, with demanding investors and the need to establish sustainability as fast as possible, can we build a solid (even elegant) technical infrastructure and, at the same time, create a civilized and respectful work place?

Experience suggests that by the time an organization grows to about 12 people, the culture is established. I'm looking for the right "culture-defining" people that have the intellectual chops, curiosity, and ability to contribute to our vision; the maturity to help bring about the change we wish to see in the world; and have the technical moxie to execute at the same time.

John Helm
LinkedIn

November 2015