

A1: Needfinding

Greg, Julia, Reid, Sera

Meet the team



Greg Kalman
Linguistics BA
MSCS?



Julia Rhee
Symbolic Systems BS
Computer Science MS

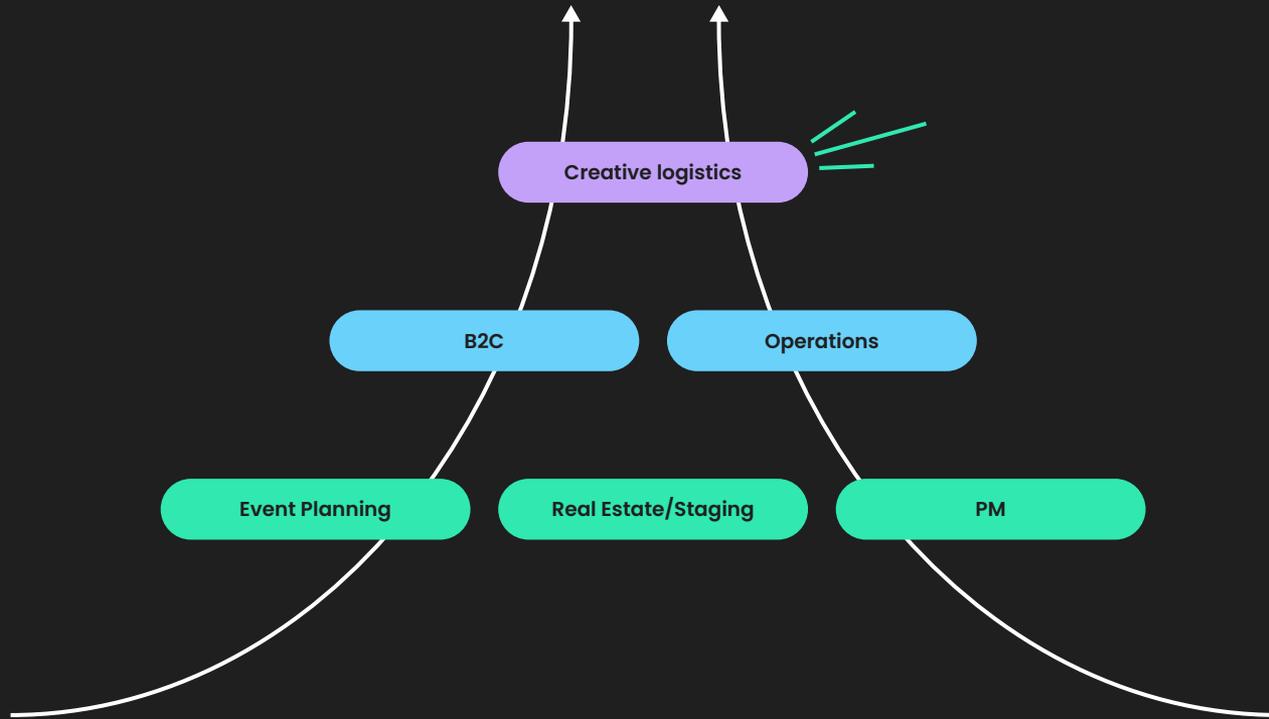


Reid McCaw
BS Symbolic Systems
MS Computer Science - HCI



Sera Camas
BS Symbolic Systems
MS Computer Science - HCI

Our consumer segment



Interviewees



Jonah

mid-large-size staging biz
President, Co-Owner

Mid-50s, former lawyer and
CPA turned staging manager
Backend



Mona

mid-large-size staging biz
Founder, Co-Owner

Mid-50s, former photographer
turned stager
Frontend



Olivia

Margins Market
Founder

Early 20s, former FashionX
president, sustainability and
commercialization at unspun,
design consultant at Konrad
Group



Emma

Professional Artist

Mid 30s, Large-scale painter,
NFT enthusiast



Melanie

Stealth Startup
Co-Founder

Mid-40s, Head of Product @
Amazon, Board Member, CPO
of EdTech startup

Methodology

Participants

Participants were recruited from Nextdoor and in-line at Verve coffee. We also reached out to our broader networks via cold outreach. We sought out individuals in the broader creative logistics space (staging, event planning, product, etc.)

Interview Location

Two interviews took place at Verve in Palo Alto, two took place in the interviewee's SF home, and one took place over the phone.

Roles

Within each interview team of two, one team member led the discussion while the other managed transcription and notetaking.

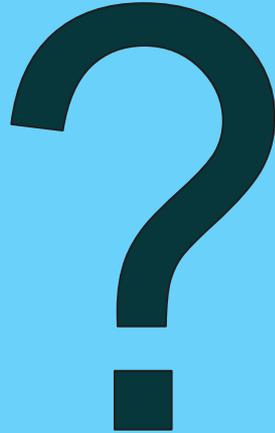
Tools

Apple voice memos and google doc notes were used to take down the contents of the interviews.

Why do you use the tools you do?

When is your creativity limited by your tools?

Walk me through a pain point in your process



How are you adopting new tech?

How do you retain customers?

Why do you use X tool? What benefits does it bring you?

What would you change about the digital tools you use?

Was there anything about the creative nature of your work that made collaboration harder?

Key Learnings

Your connections determine your success

In an industry prone to sudden decline, customer connection matters more than growth speed.

Single point contacts lead to information bottlenecks

“Having a single point of contact for vendors slowed information flow, since all updates had to be manually passed through me.”

- Olivia

Digital creative tools often have high learning curves

These tools often come with steep learning curves, and at large companies there are usually specialists dedicated to mastering each tool because of this challenge.

There's a missing link in creativity tools

“So many creative apps exist, but none cover everything. A single tool that streamlines the process, from vibecoding to the final product, would be far more efficient.”

- Melanie

Mona

- extreme user!



-in the biz last 20+ years

-manages a team of 30+ employees

-over 60 open jobs at the moment

-inventory of over 10,000 pieces of furniture, art, etc.

say

"The staging is the advertising"

"I was buying furniture off craigslist on the way to a house"

"Efficiency is our differentiator"

"Improv or die"

"It took a while to get off the ground"

"Nothing matters more than the top 30 realtors"

"Top talent in SF all have jobs"

"Our in-house handyman is a differentiator"

"We acquired a good amount of realtors via sellers"

"We thought we were going under maybe 10 times"

"We recruit sellers, not realtors, via socials"

"We have to wine and dine the realtors"

"1% of realtors make 70% of deals"

"3 realtors account for 50% of our business"

"If we say no, we risk losing realtor loyalty"

think

small team > big team

our investment is measured in decades

keep ops lean and cash-focused

do just enough

most of my business comes from only a few people

connections is the cornerstone

reciprocity with agents is key

talent is off-grid

momentum to launch, connections to stay around

formality isn't a necessity

do

move operations in-house

network with new agents through existing

go straight to agency offices

take on jobs that go beyond just staging

keep a big inventory

low-commit remodels

Office Suite

know the consumer segment

agree to jobs of all sizes

invest in people, not objects

shell out cash if necessary

take calls whenever--even in the midst of interviews

responsibility towards clients

move with the market

closeness toward repeat customers

addiction to the grind

our full-stack approach is our advantage

no difference between product and adverts

quality comes from thriftiness

if we stop for a second, we will sink

cognizant of differentiators

physical investments aren't worth it

gratitude for repeat customers

feel

say

think

"If we say no,
we risk losing
realtor
loyalty"

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connections to
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take calls
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no difference
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do

feel

Mona

- extreme user!



When dynamism and thriftiness are key to business success, a single missed opportunity can weaken your impact.

Need: Frontend stagers need simple ways to connect to build up their client base. If there's no difference between product and advertising, your product needs to be available 24/7.

Next steps



The creation process has too many steps -> interview a narrower scope (staging/event planning) to understand where workflows break down.

Users said streamlining would be far more efficient -> map out the workflow in detail to spot the most overwhelming steps.

Single-point contacts create difficulties -> define the core coordination needs that would ease information flow.

Steep learning curves block adoption -> prototype simplified ways of organizing moving pieces to test with target users.

Thank you!

Appendix

Jonah



President, Co-Owner
Full-time since profitability in
'11

say

"Ads on craigslist never work"

"The top realtors make staggers compete"

"Get the job done"

"If you don't follow market growth, you can tank your business"

"I took out 22 credit cards"

"We're not cheap, but we'll always say yes"

"I can't survive without the designers"

"Realtors are the key"

"We haven't taken out loans since '08"

"80% are return clients"

"Word of mouth is key"

"Yelp sucks for advertising"

"All the good social media is done by realtors with too much time"

"I connect through my organization, and others connect me"

"I'm part of a trade organization"

"We're not a commodity"

think

why would I network via socials?

creative talent hard to come by

reciprocity is the KPI

paid ads are misaligned

invest in people and connections, not goods

the market is too crowded to slow down

make connections with the biggest clients

my reputation is built on trust

high risk, high reward

getting in over our heads isn't a big deal

inventory is the portfolio

do

say yes now, think later

organize on a single platform

airtable and quickbooks use only

focus on small touches-- art, plants

don't go after socials

source clients through realtors

prioritize personal relationships

follow growth/shrinkage

expand carefully, with cash

90 days staged free before rent

proud of connections

wary toward adopting socials

supported by my trade org

nothing matters more than loyalty

tension with powerful players

total no on AI

if you can't adapt, you die

all-in attitude, at personal expense

socials are full of slop

reputation= durable, cash flow= fragile

feel

say

think

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through my
organization,
and others
connect me"

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not goods

organize
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reputation=
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do

feel

Jonah



In a fragile industry like staging, connection is key to staying booked.

Need: Backend stagers want to leverage old connections and groups to minimize pain of making new connections. Meeting new people via new methods is rarely worth it.

Melanie

Former Head of Product @ Amazon



A former product manager who shared that many digital creative tools have steep learning curves, so large companies rely on specialists to master them.

Need: Users need digital creative tools that are easier to learn and use, so they don't have to rely on dedicated specialists to handle essential tasks.

Melanie

say

"I really value when tools save me and my team time"

"These tools make my day harder when they don't integrate"

"I choose tools because they fit into my workflow"

"It's frustrating to re-enter the same info in multiple places"

Efficiency is crucial. Tech should remove friction, not add it

Sometimes I have to settle for less than ideal solutions

I wish everything was more seamless

I don't want to spend my creative energy wrestling with software

think

Uses multiple digital tools daily for PM work

Can't manage being proficient in multiple digital tools

Frustrated when tools create inefficiencies

Excited when tools are smooth, simple, and powerful

Adapts workflows depending on tool limitations

Anxious about deadlines if a tool slows things down

do

feel

Olivia



- "startup" market founder
- managed large teams and physical inventory
- produced a magazine and editorials for the brand

Olivia
say

think

"Small brands have trouble reaching Western audiences."

"We wanted to celebrate culture and give brands more visibility."

"Stanford connections made people more receptive."

"Notion helped us keep tasks, meeting notes, and schedules in one place."

"Figma let multiple designers work together on posters and the zine."

"Pinterest was great for moodboards and photoshoot inspiration."

"The first pop-up was hardest — no proof of success."

"External vendors often only used email."

"I wish I had been more confident and reached out earlier."

"As the founder, I had to pick up the slack if others didn't deliver."

Small, independent brands often lack digital organization.

Collaboration tools are powerful when multiple people can see and edit at once.

Manual vendor workflows create inefficiencies for tech-enabled teams.

The founder bears ultimate responsibility if tasks slip through.

Confidence in outreach is critical early on.

Centralizing notes/tasks is better than scattered Google Docs.

A proof-of-concept event makes onboarding much easier.

do

feel

Reached out to brands through social media (Instagram, TikTok).

Leveraged Stanford / FashionX connections.

Organized team tasks, notes, and updates in Notion.

Used Pinterest boards to guide photoshoot ideas.

Managed storage of incoming inventory before events.

Coordinated brand timelines for shipping and manufacturing.

Transcribed vendor communications into internal tools (e.g., from email → Notion/Figma).

Inspired by cultural self-expression through fashion.

Overwhelmed by founder responsibilities and workload.

Gratitude for repeat collaborators and team contributions.

Energized by collaboration and creative alignment (zine, posters).

Excited when brands were receptive and joined.

Relieved when the first pop-up succeeded.

Frustrated by manual, email-only vendor workflows.

Emma



- *large-scale abstract painter*
- *expanded into NFTs, digital campaigns, and online sales*
- *uses Facebook, Instagram, Shopify as main platforms*

Emma
say

think

"I watched someone create a Shopify account with the help of AI so quickly"

"No one posts in a raw file, everyone posts it edited."

"I have to do everything myself, or I have to ask a favor, and everyone is busy."

Nowadays I've been using AI, agent is doing it.

"Creating art is challenging."

"For me so far is Facebook. I would say 80% of my art buyers."

"NFT is a huge trend, figured that there was a fear of missing out."

"It's very constraint to who you know, and what you've done."

"I do use a MacBook, Mac offers Photoshop and simple editing tools."

"Learning digital tools take a long time"

Traditional art forms feel safer and more familiar than digital.

creative talent hard to come by

Galleries and institutions have the real power

editing and presentation are just as important as the artwork itself

Everyone else seems more digitally skilled and that puts her at a disadvantage.

referrals matter more than talent.

outsourcing digital work is the only way forward

AI and new tools could level the playing field

To succeed, you must play by algorithms

do

feel

simple edits before uploading.

Knocks on institutional doors

Never posts raw files

Posts artwork on Facebook as main sales channel

Experiments with color

Experiment with slow motion + short films.

Seeks referrals

Tests AI agents

intimidated by digital tools

eager but uneasy about new platforms

tired of marketing taking time from art

ambitious for institutional recognition

frustrated by constant self-promotion

anxious about missing NFT wave

proud of her traditional craft

hopeful about AI leveling the field