

OHANA CASE STUDY



How RCG helped Ohana navigate
the Chicago student-rental market

CLIENT BACKGROUND

Ohana is a start-up founded by Ezra Gershanok and Jacob Halbert created to help college students find short-term housing or short-term subleasees during the summer. They aim to solve the issue many college students face: paying thousands of dollars in rent for somewhere they may not be living during the summer.

Aiming to replace Facebook as the main marketplace for finding roommates or subleasees, Ohana certifies through a .edu email that a user is a college student, allows users to get to know the area they would be moving to and people they would be living with, and overall aims to facilitate an easier and safer subleasing process.

The platform launched in March of 2023 during the partnership between the Rambler Consulting Group and Ohana. Since then, they have garnered over 500 users, 160 listings, and \$625,000 in pre-seed funding from the accelerator venture capitalist firm Neo.

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SITUATION

The Ohana co-founders came to RCG as student advisors in the creation process for Ohana. RCG was hired to fulfill the tasks of market research and market sizing for Chicago, creation of market-entrance strategies, website enrichment and development, and executing go-to-market strategies at Loyola University Chicago and in the greater area surrounding the university.

Loyola was a targeted partnership for Ohana because of the school's location. Chicago is a hotspot for many midwestern students' internships and with the move comes a need for short-term housing. Ohana knew that if RCG could help them break into the market at Loyola and get students to list their apartments, they could then create a network for students from Purdue, the University of Michigan, the University of Wisconsin, Notre Dame, and others that were coming to Chicago for the summer.

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ANALYSIS & RESULTS

During the first few weeks of the case, the Ohana team looked into the market size of Loyola by answering the questions of “Where do Loyola students live?”, “Where do students moving to Chicago want to live?”, and developing a market sizing methodology for the off-campus housing supply and demand at Loyola. The associates found there were two main competitors in Chicago that Ohana would have to be aware of: Facebook and PlacesForStudents. PlacesForStudents had an existing partnership with Loyola, but little use by students. While not specifically a subleasing site, Facebook was the primary platform many students used to find subleasers, roommates, housing, and so on. The team determined Ohana would need to distinguish itself from both platforms to penetrate the market.

Another large part of this project was looking into the property managers, landlords, and leases that were common around the university. While there were a few large property management companies, some mom-and-pop landlords rented specifically to Loyola students. Understanding the landlords’ thoughts around subleasing, allowances in the leases, and general law surrounding it was an essential task that RCG completed to aid in Ohana’s success in Chicago. Associates set up meetings with two major property management companies and two small landlords for Ezra and Jacob so that they could better understand the subleasing process not only for the landlords but for Loyola students.

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ANALYSIS & RESULTS

As Ohana neared the launch date, the team switched gears to focus on go-to-market and market-entrance strategies for Ohana. This included researching how other companies utilized student ambassadors to market directly to college students, reaching out to local businesses about advertising for Ohana or potentially partnering to do a promotion with them, recording student video testimonials, and working with Loyola organizations to spread the word about Ohana in preparation for its launch. Coupled with this was Beta testing.

The team had access to the Beta version of the Ohana site, and meticulously went through the registration, listing, searching, and posting processes to give detailed feedback to Jacob as he got the website ready for launch. Due to RCG's insights, the Ohana co-founders added additional safety and security features, such as verification of student emails to keep listers safe and differentiate Ohana from Facebook, as well as the ability to accept requests from interested parties before they could see any information about the potential roommates that is listed along with the post.

In the last few weeks of the partnership, the Ohana team completed much on-the-ground marketing work for Ohana. With the assistance of RCG's marketing partner, eye-catching and informative flyers were created and distributed around the school and in local businesses in the community.

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ANALYSIS & RESULTS

Additionally, the team coordinated articles about RCG and Ohana to be written for the student newspaper to aid in greater awareness. To capstone the partnership, a tabling session in Loyola's student center and an informational event were coordinated for Ezra and Jacob's visit to Loyola to aid in marketing and bringing awareness about Ohana to the student body.

By the end of our 10-week partnership, RCG had helped Ohana enter the Chicago market, garnering over 300 new users within the first two weeks of launch and 12 Chicago listings within four weeks after launch. One month after the end of the partnership, Ohana has grown to have over 500 users and 30 listings in the Chicago area. RCG has also helped hire one product management intern and three student ambassadors from Loyola to continue to manage growth in Chicago.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

RCG concluded its 10-week partnership with Ohana with five recommendations for Jacob and Ezra as they grow Ohana with the funding that Neo has provided:

1. Aim to create a presence on Facebook to better create an avenue for students to switch from Facebook to its platform.
2. Utilize students in a more meaningful way by making them a more permanent part of the Ohana team through internships, student ambassador programs, or partnerships with university clubs.
3. Build out the safety and security features on the platform and advertise them as a main differentiator from Facebook.
4. Build out the social aspect of Ohana; students moving to a new city for summer internships often do not know anyone there, so if Ohana could offer a community of college-aged students in the area to meet, that would draw in users.
5. Work to facilitate utility payments, contractual sublease agreements, and others as a “premium feature” to help monetize Ohana.

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CONCLUSION

Overall, RCG's Ohana team highly recommends that any business, of any size, looking to market to college students utilizes college students as much as possible. RCG was one of 14 student partnerships that Ohana had, and we were thrilled to work along with consulting groups at Columbia, Stanford, UCLA, Northwestern, the University of Chicago, and others. When marketing a product to a certain demographic, having input from members of that demographic is essential, and RCG's partnership with Ohana is a testimonial to this.