Building Successful Nonprofit-Fintech Partnerships

A resource to help organizations
identify, develop, launch,
and scale nonprofit
and for-profit partnerships.

Acknowledgements

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GreenPath would also like to thank Kimberly Gartner and Kate Dole for their invaluable assistance with capturing these insights and writing this publication.

Origin Story of the GreenPath-EarnUp Partnership

In fall 2016, amongst nonprofits and startups, fintechs and large financial institutions, two mission-driven soul-mates found each other.

Fast Friends

When we first met EarnUp at a Network Summit hosted by the Center for Financial Services Innovation in late September 2016, we were struck by the alignment of our organizations' missions. We immediately sensed the potential for a partnership that could address strategic challenges on both sides. At GreenPath, we were grappling with how to serve more of the customers who came through our doors. EarnUp was trying to broaden its customer base, particularly among the types of people we were aiming to serve better.

Eighteen days after this initial introduction, Matthew Cooper, EarnUp's Co-Founder and CEO, along with his marketing and product team, was sitting in our Farmington Hills, Michigan office. By mid-November, EarnUp was on-site for the launch of our jointly branded new product. By January 2017, we had enough data to suggest we could achieve wide customer adoption if we could scale our efforts.

That breakneck pace – from first acquaintance to active partnership in only ten weeks – was possible in part because of the uniquely strong alignment of our missions and needs. However, the speed of our launch was also strategic. At GreenPath, we had spent the prior year shifting our culture to facilitate both innovation and strategic partnerships to broaden our impact.

We sensed that a clear and compelling vision for the future would energize our employees and serve as our "true north." At GreenPath, we captured our vision in our Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal (BHAG)[1]: To Remix the American Dream so It Works for Everyone™. By beginning at the end, we could be confident that all our decisions and efforts were leading us down the right path. We also realized we couldn't achieve our BHAG alone: partnerships were essential for success.

Culture Change a Prerequisite

At GreenPath, we have strong core values that resonate with our staff. We have dedicated employees who are motivated by our mission and purpose. However, in 2016, we realized mission and core values were not enough to drive the high-impact results we sought. We needed to change our culture to enable innovative ideas to take hold, and to welcome partnerships that could help us advance those ideas.

We gave ourselves permission to try things and see what happened, rather than deliberating endlessly about new products or projects. We worked to instill a bias to action throughout the organization. Our strategy required getting comfortable with the idea that some things would go wrong – but that we would be learning along the way.

We also sensed that a clear and compelling vision for the future would energize our employees and serve as our "true north." At GreenPath, we captured our vision in our Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal (BHAG)[1]: To Remix the American Dream so It Works for Everyone™. By beginning at the end, we could be confident that all our decisions and efforts were leading us down the right path. We also realized we couldn't achieve our BHAG alone: partnerships were essential for success.

With this important – and challenging – work as a precursor, we were ready to engage in a partnership with EarnUp.
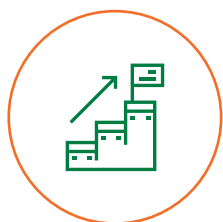
Spoiler Alert: A Successful Start

We are excited by the early results of the partnership with EarnUp. In March 2017, after four months of testing, we moved from prototyping to full pilot. While much of our data is proprietary, the results are promising: the first 125 clients enrolled in the program included $9,300,000 loan dollars, in aggregate. By using the Simple Payment Plan, they have the potential to save a total of $600,000.* Our partnership was even recognized with an award: GreenPath won the 2017 Innovative Practices Award from the Council on Accreditation. Moving forward, we are making further investments to fully operationalize the solution throughout GreenPath.

[1]For more information on BHAGs, See Jim Collins' book, Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Other's Don't.

*All savings figures are estimates only and are based on example loan information. Savings calculated are net of fees ($19.95/month) and occur as a result of extra payments made towards principal. The loan must be paid to completion in order to realize the savings. There is no change to the terms and conditions of the loan. Actual results may vary.

GreenPath™
financial wellness

GreenPath is a national nonprofit financial wellness organization. We work with people and organizations across the nation to support the financial wellness of individuals and to build a world where it's easier to make healthy financial choices.

We work with each client to assess their situation and create an action plan for achieving their financial goals. We listen with respect, offer advice and information, and suggest products and services that meet people's needs.

Those burdened by debt may qualify for a debt management program that enables them to repay all of their debts in full with one manageable payment at lower interest rates. We actively work with clients, contact their creditors, secure interest and fee concessions, and encourage their success every step of the way. Depending on the circumstances, we also offer specialized advice on decisions about student loans, bankruptcy or housing.

We are expanding our products and services to support a full range of financial wellness needs.
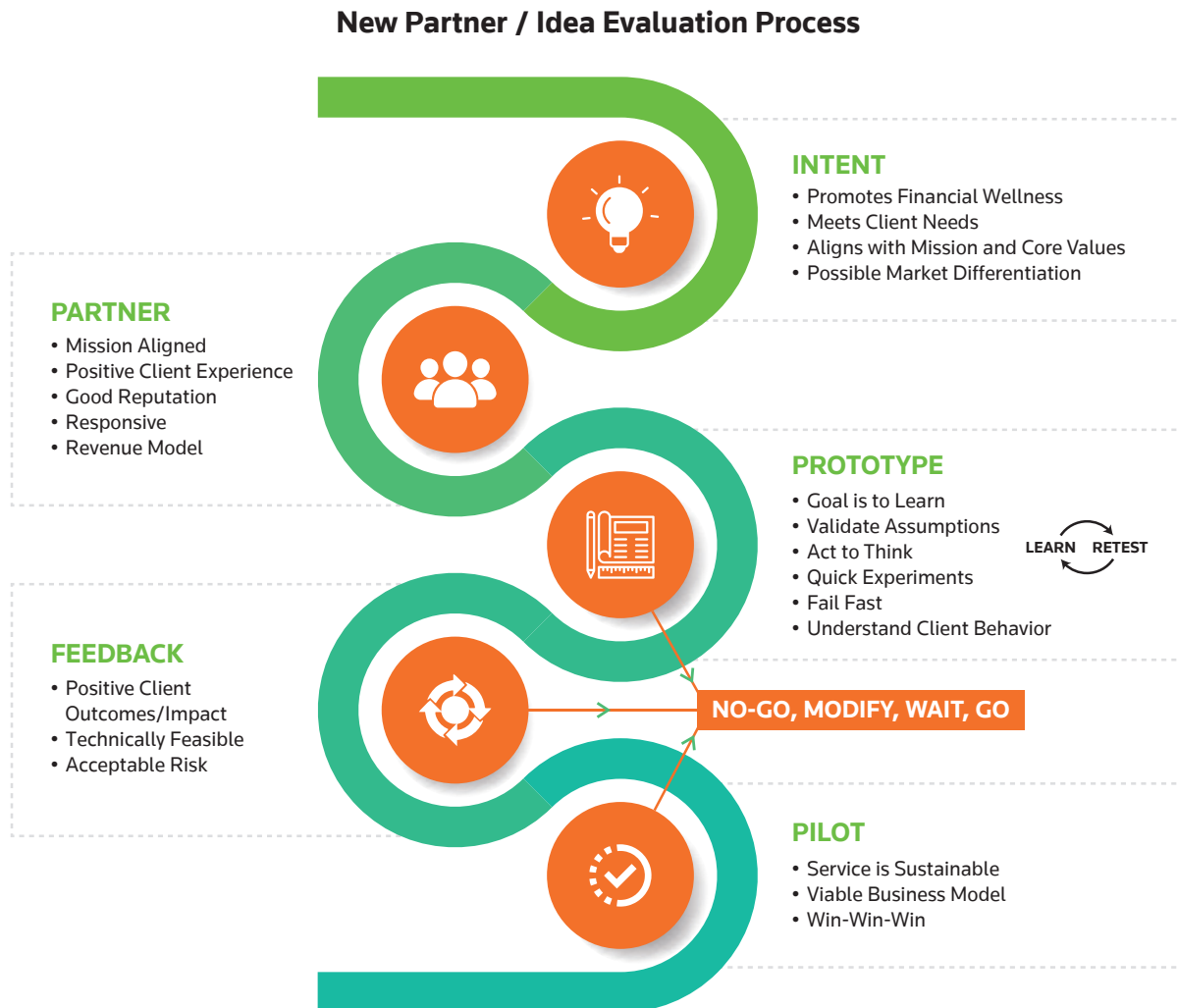
earnup

EarnUp is a technology platform that intelligently automates loan payments and identifies earning opportunities for the 200 million Americans who are indebted. The EarnUp platform helps people improve their financial health with tools to better manage, track and automate loan payments from one platform. It works by breaking up individual monthly loan payments into smaller, micro-withdrawals spread throughout the month. Withdrawals are synced with the customer's income schedule, and the full payment for each bill is made on their behalf. In addition to freeing up time otherwise spent actively budgeting, the EarnUp platform can help people avoid late payments and penalty fees – and can actually help them get ahead by automatically identifying opportunities to accelerate payments so that they can get out of debt faster.

Introduction

The framework below illustrates our process of considering new partners and ideas.

New Partner / Idea Evaluation Process

INTENT
- Promotes Financial Wellness
- Meets Client Needs
- Aligns with Mission and Core Values
- Possible Market Differentiation

PARTNER
- Mission Aligned
- Positive Client Experience
- Good Reputation
- Responsive
- Revenue Model

PROTOTYPE
- Goal is to Learn
- Validate Assumptions
- Act to Think
- Quick Experiments
- Fail Fast
- Understand Client Behavior

LEARN   RETEST

FEEDBACK
- Positive Client Outcomes/Impact
- Technically Feasible
- Acceptable Risk

NO-GO, MODIFY, WAIT, GO

PILOT
- Service is Sustainable
- Viable Business Model
- Win-Win-Win

In this publication, we have adopted the framework to organize the telling of our story, with each chapter describing one of the five steps illustrated above (Intent, Partner, Prototype, Feedback, Pilot). Each chapter provides context around our approach, along with action items to consider for any nonprofit exploring new ideas and/or partnerships. For instance, the "Form an Intent" chapter has three action items: clearly articulate core shifts, identify strategies, and establish criteria.

This document draws on insights we gained from three different partnerships we tested over the course of a year, plus other partnership opportunities we explored. We provide the most details on the EarnUp example, as it was the first to scale.

Rather than create a best practices manual, our goal is to present a set of principles, insights and tools that can help guide nonprofits and financial technology firms through the process of navigating a partnership. We hope this publication provides useful information for you and your organization.

Form an Intent

*Our intent was simple:
Serve more people in ways
that work for them.*

> *"GreenPath wanted to maintain longer-term, more engaged relationships with more of its customers. They have one primary service, the debt management plan (DMP). For every customer that doesn't take that solution, they don't have a longer-term engagement option. And they don't have a next step beyond the DMP."*
>
> *–Matthew Cooper, Co-Founder and CEO, EarnUp*

> *"It's interesting to hear Matthew explain how he pursued our major pain point. We didn't realize it at the time, but that's what he was doing. We had already done the deep work to look at the data, understand our customers better, and change our culture. We were ready to explore ways to address that pain point."*
>
> *– Donna McNeill, COO, GreenPath*

The formation of a clear intent can illuminate whether and how partnerships may be useful.

Despite a successful history in our core mission, at GreenPath, we had a massive pain point. While we counseled and provided budgets and action plans for hundreds of thousands of people each year, we engaged in long-term services with only five percent of the people who contacted us. We were helping lots of people, but we knew we could be doing more. Alongside our desire to serve more customers, we also wanted to maintain longer-term, more engaged relationships; to help customers act on GreenPath's budgeting and money management recommendations; and to add new options to help people achieve their American Dream.

We recognized we needed partners to develop new services to meet our customers' needs to achieve the end goal. As a nonprofit, we can't – and shouldn't – build everything ourselves.

Our Path

To advance our intent – helping people achieve their American Dream –we needed to broaden our capabilities and serve more people. Acknowledging our solution was meeting the needs of only a small percentage of customers, we set our sights on identifying strategies and partners that could help us do more.

EarnUp's Pain Point

EarnUp's challenge was that the people who were drawn to their product were generally not under financial duress. Their initial customers were not carrying onerous amounts of debt. Lower-income people have the greatest need, but EarnUp found that these customers were the hardest to reach. Partnering with GreenPath and leveraging our reputation with customers created built-in trust so EarnUp could advance its mission with people who really needed help.

Action Items

Clearly Articulate Core Shifts	Identify Strategies	Establish Criteria
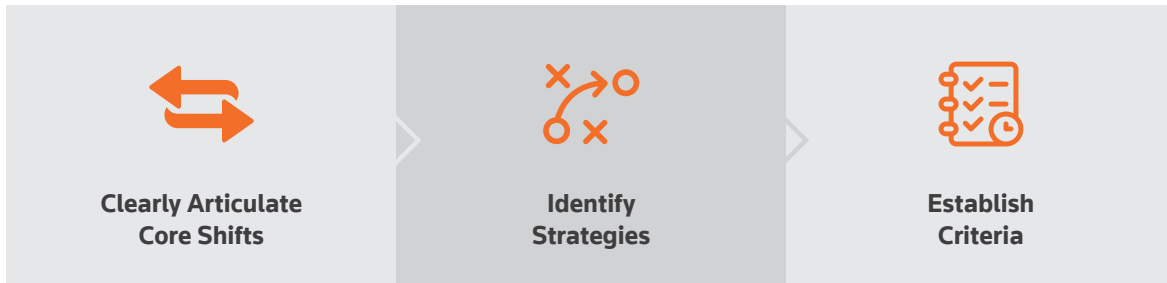
Clearly Articulate Core Shifts

We employed a "From-To" framework to help us name and describe the core shifts we wanted to make. Articulating these ideas solidified our intent, and provided a simple way to share our philosophy throughout the organization. This exercise also helped us gather feedback from staff about specific steps that would move us closer to where we wanted to be as an organization.

Here are some "From-To" statements we've used to shift our organizational focus:

From	To
Assuming we know what our clients need	Investing significant resources to better learn what our clients need
Focus on debt and crisis	Focus on overall financial health and wellness
Competitors are a threat to our business	Collaboration helps us expand our reach and add value in new ways
Extensive planning in pursuit of perfection	Forward movement in pursuit of learning
Vendor relationships	Win-win-win partnerships

We found the intent formation process more difficult than we anticipated: these were large, strategic shifts. We needed to be deliberate and persistent in communicating with employees to help them understand the change and realize that this process of strategic thinking was not just a "flavor of the month" that would soon fade. The "From-To" framework was a critical tool, not only to help with internal communications, but also to help us clarify how and why partnerships were important.

Identify Strategies

To get people thinking bigger, we used a variety of statement starters[2], such as:

- It would be game-changing if…
- How might we…
- I wish we could…

Some of the statements that came out of this exercise were as follows:

- It would be game-changing if…managing money were as engaging as planning a vacation.
- How might we…help our clients sleep better at night?
- I wish we could…eliminate the complexity of managing money.

Each of these statements, and many others, sparked discussions that helped us move from intent to action and form concrete ideas about how we might achieve our vision.

We use statement starters now with everything we do. It's how we get started with a project team or move to another phase of work. These prompts establish the vision—the lofty goal that everyone is striving for. By answering statements like these, people can visualize the goal differently, in unexpected ways. Thinking this way removes obstacles and creates inspiration for the team.

Establish Criteria for Ideas to Address the Intent

We sought ideas from anywhere we could find them, but we did set criteria for the ideas to help us stay focused. Ideas had to not only address our intent, but also:

- Promote financial wellness.
- Meet customer needs.
- Be delivered in an ethical, transparent manner.
- Include appropriate consumer protections.
- Align with our mission, core values, and BHAG.
- Provide market differentiation.

[2] For more information see "Statement Starters" from the LUMA Institute book: *Innovating for People: Handbook of Human-Centered Design Methods* and the Civilla refresher: *ideas to accompany those in pursuit of designing a more beautiful world.*

Select Potential Partners

Define your "no matter whats."
Test first, solidify partnership details later.

> *"Data and customer experience are deal breakers for us. Our partners must have the ability to offer the product in a timely fashion, live up to customers' expectations, and tell us what happened with our customers."*
>
> *–Donna McNeill, COO, GreenPath*

> *"The most successful partnerships have a fundamental mission alignment and address fundamental pain points. Without those elements, the chance of success is very low. Both parties must also give the same level of priority to the partnership and have senior level engagement."*
>
> *– Matthew Cooper, Founder and CEO, EarnUp*

The right partners bring diverse skills, experience and perspective.

We knew the right partnerships could supercharge our efforts to serve more customers more effectively. And we needed a way to quickly evaluate potential partners without allowing a heavy-duty vetting process to stall our progress.
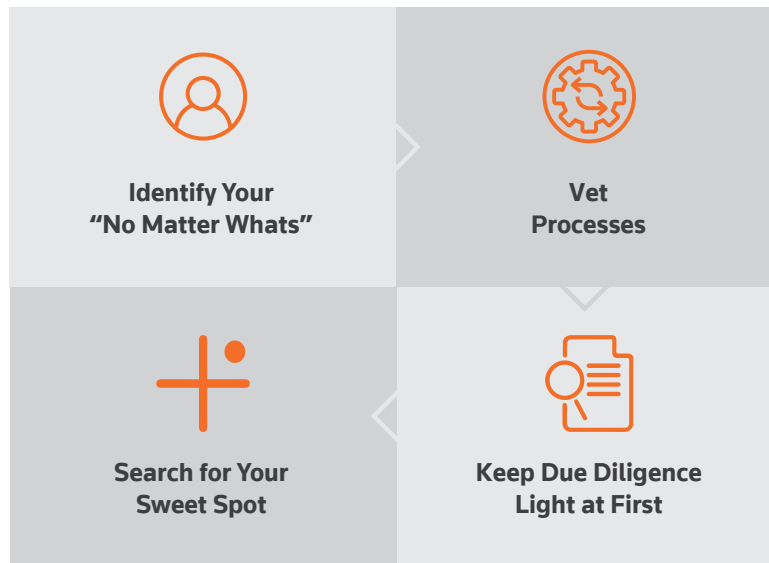
Both nonprofits and financial technology firms bring separate areas of expertise that can combine to create powerful solutions to improve people's lives. To find the right partner, however, we needed to ensure a "beginner's mindset." This meant shedding preconceived notions. Fintech firms often think of nonprofits as slow moving and lacking in business acumen. Nonprofits often assume fintech companies are solely focused on achieving their IPO, and thus won't be long-term partners. By shedding these biases, organizations can more clearly see opportunities to work together and make each other better.

This work is easier to do when a clear intent exists to highlight the value a partner brings (as described in Chapter 1). When we met EarnUp, it was immediately evident that their platform could help us serve more of the customers who came to us – a perfect fit with our intent. The mutual benefits of our partnership were even more clear-cut since GreenPath's customer base included the very customers EarnUp hoped to serve more effectively.

Our Path

The most efficient way to test concepts with partners is to start using their services. We strive to work very closely up-front, focused on rapid iteration, learning and action, rather than doing heavy preliminary due diligence. Being clear about our "no matter whats" ensures we can confidently form preliminary partnerships, allowing us to jump quickly into product testing: the best way to confirm that a solution meets customer needs.

Action Items

Identify Your "No Matter Whats"	**Vet Processes**
Search for Your Sweet Spot	**Keep Due Diligence Light at First**

Identify Your "No Matter Whats"

We've had partnerships with a number of companies in recent years, and in all of them, we found that a short list of "no matter whats" was helpful as we engaged in partnership discussions. For example:

- No matter what, we can't sacrifice trust. We always pick a partner that will preserve customer trust.
- No matter what, our partner must be mission-aligned and have solutions that improve people's lives.
- No matter what, partners must adhere to consumer protections, including transparency.
- No matter what, the solution must have national reach and the ability to scale.
- No matter what, the partner must be willing to evolve with us.
- No matter what, senior leaders must be engaged.

With EarnUp, we found a partner who could work with us to develop a solution that meets a need of our customer. EarnUp was willing to adapt their service to our customer base, and that willingness to learn and evolve with us was critical. One example of a customer difference that led to product evolution was the fact that our clients need more assistance with the enrollment process than EarnUp's existing customers. Self-enrollment didn't work for the GreenPath audience. We learned this along the way and created new processes together.

Vet Processes

Instead of just focusing on partner solutions, it is also critical to ask questions about processes, to find out whether partners have established thoughtful processes. Inconsistent processes can lead to inconsistent customer experiences, which can lead to a breakdown in trust.

Examples of some of the process questions we now ask include:

- What is the process for capturing data and measuring outcomes?
- How do you communicate with customers and resolve customer concerns?
- What do you do if a customer does not follow up with necessary information?
- What do you do if a customer does not pay?
- How quickly do you respond to customer concerns?
- What type of support will you provide to GreenPath as we train our staff?

Keep Due Diligence Light at First

Taking a light approach to preliminary vetting, rather than getting bogged down with initial due diligence, can accelerate learnings about whether the service meets customer needs and the partner is a good fit. We move most of the heavy due diligence and partnership vetting to the middle of the process, focusing our early energy and efforts on product testing and customer feedback loops.

While we hold off on signing a full contract with partners until we determine if the product is viable and scalable, we do take some basic actions early on to protect ourselves and our partners. We sign Letters of Intent to ensure alignment. We formally document our common understanding of our goals to ensure that we create the best service for our customers, with both parties acting in good faith. New fintech firms do not always succeed, and we want to ensure our organization and our customers are protected if the partner or partnership ultimately fails.

One item that must be prioritized, even in this light approach, is conducting a partner site visit. A first-hand view of a partner's operation can reveal a lot about scale, professionalism, partnership priorities, etc. We learned this the hard way when, with a different partner, it took us several months to realize their business was not mature enough for a partnership. We would have saved a lot of time if we had visited them earlier in the process.

Search for Your Sweet Spot

We have found there's a bit of a sweet spot for partnerships. We developed a matrix to evaluate potential partnerships, with the vertical axis representing customer needs and the horizontal axis representing the maturity of the company. Our sweet spot is the upper right quadrant. However, if there's a very high need and the solution is unique in the marketplace, we might be more willing to take a chance with a company in the upper left quadrant.

High Need

Sweet
Spot ★

Organization Stage

Startup ←——————————————→ Established

Client Needs

Low Need
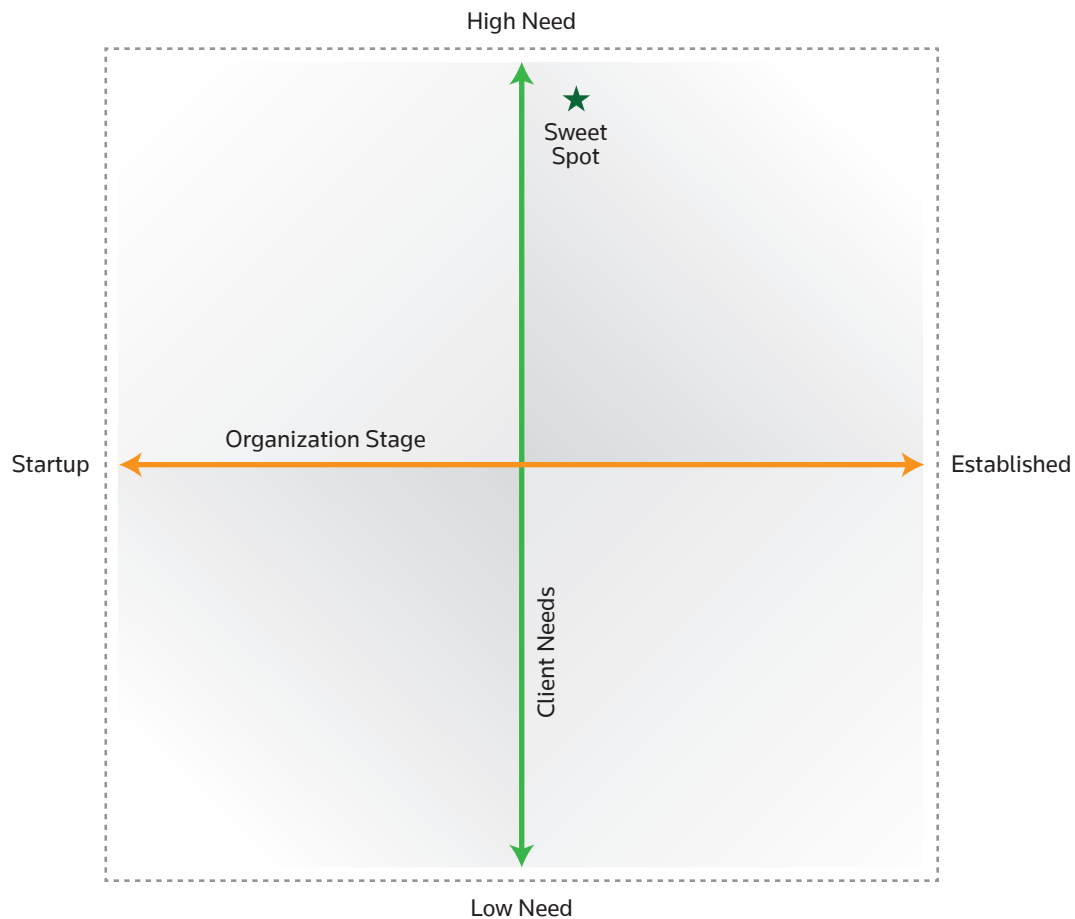
Tips for Selecting Partners

- *Identify your "No Matter Whats."*
- *Ensure strong mission alignment.*
- *Identify the pain point the partnership will solve.*
- *Find companies with cultures that are compatible.*
- *Ask questions about processes, not just outcomes.*
- *Ensure both companies are committed to learning and will prioritize the prototype or partnership equally.*
- *Visit before signing an agreement.*
- *Require senior level engagement on both sides.*

Implement and Manage Prototypes

Prototype. Learn. Revise. Prototype Again.

> **"** *"Act to think. Don't committee it out. Get something going. We learn so much more by doing than by talking about it."*
>
> *–Kristen Holt, President and CEO, GreenPath*

> **"** *"GreenPath had a tremendous willingness to test and try things. The tests haven't always been clean. They almost never were perfect."*
>
> *– Matthew Cooper, Founder and CEO, EarnUp*

Rapid testing leads to rapid learning, about both product and partner.

Within ten weeks of meeting, the EarnUp team was onsite with us to launch our first "sprint," our term for testing a prototype with specific learning goals over a short time period. During these sprints, we assembled a team of staff members from both organizations and held "war room" strategy meetings. Over a period of four months, we tested, learned, failed fast, revised, and prototyped again. Our short-term goal was to design the right service and confirm it was viable. We also kept in view our long-term goal: to fully automate processes and complete the technical integration.

Our rapid testing approach allows us to test a partner and a product solution simultaneously. One lesson comes from a different partnership we tested. A staff member found a service that seemed like a great fit for our customers. We had an initial discussion with the company's president, began referring customers to the service, and then followed up to ask users about their experience. In the end, while we liked the product, the partner was unable to provide a client experience that met our standards. We were still convinced that the service was good for our customers, though, so we found another company that offered a similar solution, had a better client experience, and provided the scale we needed.

Our Path

By getting the product out to customers quickly and constantly re-evaluating, we accelerate our learnings about the product and the best approach to designing and promoting it.

With EarnUp, we found a solution that meets a critical need of our customers. We co-created a solution to test together. Through prototyping, we gathered real data (e.g., on customer response, uptake, number of loans added to the platform) to make the case for our joint solution, rather than making assumptions and projections.

Action Items

Define Learning Goals	Select the Best Team for Success	Develop Customer Personas	Start with an MVP	Ensure Adequate Operational Structures

About the Simple Payment Plan

The Simple Payment Plan (SPP) is a service that GreenPath and EarnUp jointly created that combines EarnUp's technology solution with GreenPath's counseling support to help people navigate challenges and stay on track.

With the SPP, GreenPath financial counselors review clients' loans and expenses, help them determine which debts are eligible to go on the program, and set them up on the plan. Then, clients use the EarnUp technology to automate their payments. GreenPath counselors remain available to advise clients throughout the process.

The EarnUp app automatically breaks up a client's full monthly loan payment into smaller withdrawals spread across the entire month, typically on the days the client gets paid. Once they have collected all the withdrawals, EarnUp will make the client's full monthly loan payment on time—saving them the hassle of budgeting and managing their loan payments.

Additionally, EarnUp looks for opportunities for the client to accelerate their payoff and save significant amounts on interest over the life of the loan. Combining the EarnUp tool with GreenPath's strong nonprofit counseling creates a premium service tailored to each individual. We continue to test a variety of price points as we learn what mix of people and technology prompts customers to take action and is sustainable for the organizations.

The most common client payment schedule is the bi-weekly payment plan, as this is the most common frequency of receiving paychecks. By nature, this schedule automatically has a full extra payment going towards principal each year based on the consumer receiving 26 paychecks in a year.

To illustrate how this works: *a person with a $150,000, 30-year mortgage with a 5% interest rate and a $1,000 monthly payment could potentially save over $26,000 and pay off their loan 6 years earlier.**

This can be achieved if the person is paid every other week and EarnUp withdraws half their monthly payment each payday ($500). In a 12-month calendar, there naturally will be two months that contain three paydays. This results in EarnUp taking an additional "half payment" these months, which means they collected $1,500 for a $1,000 monthly loan payment. This additional "half payment" ($500) is automatically applied towards the loan's principal which puts the client on an accelerated track to pay off their mortgage. The person will receive 26 paychecks in a year, and EarnUp will take a "half payment" ($500) each paycheck, allowing for them to make 13 full monthly payments of $1,000 in one year.

As a result, it means the client will be making a full additional monthly payment towards their mortgage principal every year, allowing them to save over $26,000 and pay off their loan 6 years earlier. All with no change in their spending habits. By aligning withdrawals with the client's payday, EarnUp allows for the client to not have to worry about manually budgeting and the money in their account can be used for other life expenses.

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Define Learning Goals

We started each SPP prototype with a defined learning goal that described what we wanted to learn. We developed a list of questions we wanted to answer. These questions guided our work and helped us maintain focus when we were caught up in the high-energy, sometimes chaotic sprints.

Some examples of questions we asked included:

- Does this service meet a real customer need?
- What types of customers are most likely to enroll and why?
- At what point in the conversation is it most effective to mention the service?
- What "talk tracks" are most effective in describing the solution?
- Which benefits are people more interested in, saving money or matching payments to income?
- Will customers pay for the service?

> *"In our sprints, we would try different strategies until our next meeting, where we would talk about the positives and negatives. We'd play with different things. For example, we would test when to bring the Simple Payment Plan up in a conversation. Someone heard a colleague plant the seed at the start of the conversation, then the customer mentioned it at the end. Everyone started doing that and reporting out. It helped us evolve faster."*
>
> *–Jeremy Lark, Senior Manager of Client Services, GreenPath*

Select the Best Team for Success

For the initial prototyping, we developed a team of high-energy, fast-paced, and strategic staff members with a mix of styles, skill sets, and skill levels. The prototype teams weren't just made up of our "stars." We wanted to test in an environment that would help us know if we could roll out the solution across the entire organization. Later, we learned that flexibility and openness to change were common attributes among team members who were most effective at testing.

> *"We're getting a clearer picture of what makes a good prototype. In the beginning, there was some debate about who to include on the teams. Do you use anyone on staff, because they will eventually be a part of it? Or do you use people who are good with change? Ultimately, we decided to tap people who we thought would be good at testing."*
>
> *–Holly Donaldson, Senior Manager of Process Excellence, GreenPath*

To facilitate the learning process, we paired our customer-facing staff with a peer, manager or other subject matter expert. One person could focus on managing the client interaction, and the other could evaluate what was working and what was not. This pairing really accelerated our learning and insights.

We used a "Four-Box" to record observations, opportunities, surprises and next steps, and to help us break down customer interactions in a way that highlighted specific learnings.

Below is an example:

Observations
- Client did not seem to understand the explanation of the service
- The fee was not an issue for this client
- The call was much longer
- Dog was barking in the background and it was distracting

Opportunities
- Project more confidence
- Smoother handoff to set rep up for success

Surprises
- Client wished she knew about this when she first bought her house
- Client had high trust in our recommendation

Next Steps
- Think about how might we incorporate this into session without increasing the length of the call
- Observe another call after feedback incorporated

Develop Customer Personas

We used information from customers to develop customer personas. These profiles helped our staff better understand the people we were serving, their needs, and ways the Simple Payment Plan helped them. This, in turn, helped staff more easily identify and talk to prospects.

Here's an example:

Kathy's Story

She has been able to keep her mortgage current. She would like to be able to complete home repairs/improvements.

She called us, because she is struggling with $25,000 in unsecured debt.

GreenPath financial wellness

She started a Debt Management Plan with GreenPath as of June 1, 2017 to help her reduce her unsecured debt.

earnup

The Simple Payment Plan powered by EarnUp would save her $16,800 and pay off her mortgage 7 years sooner!*

Kathy lives in Iowa; she is retired and living on a fixed income. Over the last 10 years her income has been reduced, her husband passed away, and she has been helping her mother pay medical bills. As a result she has incurred $25,000 in unsecured debts. She would like to be debt free.

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Start with an MVP

As part of our "act-to-think" approach, we started with a minimally viable product (MVP) when creating technology for this pilot. We prioritized learning over heavy investment in technology to ensure we were actually achieving our goals with this prototype. The customer service interface we tested with was clunky, because we didn't want to invest a lot of development resources until we knew the solution and partnership would work. Our staff was used to more sophisticated interfaces, so this created some friction that we had to overcome.

Once we felt comfortable with which approach led to the best customer outcomes, we saw opportunities to automate and optimize at various points in the process. Now we are introducing technology optimizations to our processes.

> *"You don't want to build technology until you know the process flow you are building. The learning is the heavy lifting. You need to invest in learning. We are now building the right integration points, the right structure. I'm afraid to think about what we would have built at the beginning."*
>
> *–Matthew Cooper, Co-Founder and CEO, EarnUp*

Ensure Adequate Operational Structures

In the early stages, we underestimated the project management resources needed. Neither EarnUp nor GreenPath dedicated sufficient time, energy, and mindshare to managing the projects. There were slippages on both sides. The project management improved when we assigned dedicated staff members and established systems for regular meetings and troubleshooting.

> *"The biggest thing: make sure there is over-communication. With any type of project, the more communication the better. When you are talking about two different teams, time zones, structures of how things get escalated, who is the point of contact – the more you can get in line the better. When we held weekly meetings, established a better system of who to email with questions, focused on scheduled meetings and required communication – the partnership was strengthened."*
>
> *–Justin Okita, Operations Manager, EarnUp*

During the prototyping phase, we held weekly calibration meetings. We listened to calls together, and discussed what went well and what could be better. We also addressed project management issues and coordinated on obtaining customer feedback. Each quarter, the leadership on both teams met and discussed progress and any new or recurring issues. It's important to have a framework for raising issues and resolving them with the partner, and it's important that everyone feels confident that, when a problem develops, the leaders of the company are personally committed to helping resolve it.

> *"We've had honest conversations. There have been a few times when we're asking EarnUp, "Are you going to fix this? Are you going to stop changing the rules?" And they were asking, "Are you going to scale this?" These were honesty moments where we shared what's needed to make this work."*
>
> *–Donna McNeill, COO, GreenPath*

An important outcome of the focus on operational structures is that it helps build relationships and, ultimately, trust. Prototyping could not succeed without frontline staff becoming fully comfortable with EarnUp and its staff's commitment to a positive customer experience. It's essential to build that trust.

Overcoming Challenges

- *The GreenPath customer was different from the typical EarnUp customer. We needed to allow more time to serve this customer and also recognize there are some people – such as those who are behind on their loans – who we can't help with this product. Personas helped staff understand the customer better and align the service with their needs.*

- *There were slippages on both sides. We needed more rigorous project management and, ultimately, assigned dedicated staff to the task. Once we realized we could successfully scale this service, we added new project managers on both sides.*

- *Obtaining the data we wanted, as quickly as we wanted it, was a challenge at times. Data is critical to learning. At one point, we had to pause and define the data we needed to achieve success.*

- *Trust broke down between teams at a few points where there wasn't a consistent client experience. We had to work to regain trust. Regular meetings and candid conversations helped get key issues on the table. In-person meetings at both GreenPath and EarnUp locations helped us resolve issues and continue to move forward.*

- *It was hard to balance engagement and accountability, and to maintain momentum when we were not in a sprint. We had to continuously communicate, celebrate small wins, and keep the staff excited about the service.*

Fine-tune with User Feedback

Involve staff for deeper insights into customer experience.

> *Understand the customer journey from start to finish. Present profiles to staff. It helps with engagement, and helps staff understand that what they do really makes a difference in people's lives.*
>
> *– Bradley O'Brien, Client Services Manager, GreenPath*

Customer insights reveal opportunities and ways to improve.

As an organization, GreenPath has long prioritized soliciting customer insights as key inputs into our product development and sales processes. These insights are especially important when we are testing new products and partners, and we constantly monitor the pulse of our customer experiences through customer surveys, journaling, one-on-one interviews, and other research.

Our Path

Learning more about our customers was a critical input in readying our organization for partnerships: by getting smarter about our customers, we saw their needs and goals in new ways, and this led to insights about the products and partners that could help us meet those needs and goals. Today, continuously checking in with both customers and staff about their experiences with GreenPath and our products is essential to ensure we are realizing our vision.

Action Items

Solicit Customer Feedback	Focus on Customer Outcomes	Engage Staff
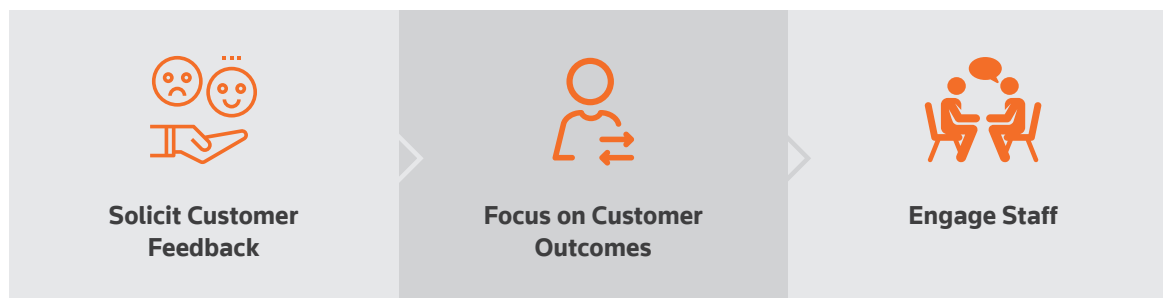
Solicit Customer Feedback

From the beginning, we were committed to soliciting customer insights with EarnUp and the Simple Payment Plan. We had conversations with customers after they had used the service for a period of time. We talked with customers who learned about the service, but didn't enroll. We didn't just seek positive feedback in these interactions. We wanted to understand their experience, hear if the Simple Payment Plan was meeting their needs, and learn about any unmet needs. We wanted to understand their full journey, where the solution provided needed support and where there was friction that kept them from engaging.

In a Customer's Own Words

Tayri, a financial wellness expert, called her client, John, to obtain feedback on his experience with the Simple Payment Plan. John enrolled his mortgage ($700/month) and a personal loan (payments are $28/month).

Tayri: I'd love to get some quick feedback on the Simple Payment Plan.
John: For me, it helped me out a lot. I have a little more money to move around now. Before it was kinda tight and everything. You know, I done good with it and it helps me out a lot. Thank you for everything you have done.

Tayri: That's great to hear! What's the difference between being on the SPP and before?
John: Before, like, shoot, I didn't know how I was going to make it. Now, it gives me a little breathing space. A little leeway to do more with the money. Pay off other bills that are short. Some months I was going without paying or I was paying late. That's not the case now. You're helping me out a lot.

The information we gather from customers has been an ongoing source of revelations and insights. The table below outlines just a few of our misconceptions and learnings.

We thought we knew...	We were surprised to learn...
Clients would use EarnUp if it saved them money overall.	Clients valued the convenience of matching payments to income even more than the savings.
Price would be a barrier.	Time is the biggest barrier.
People would only put their mortgage on the plan.	People wanted all debts on the plan for the "set it and forget it" value.

The widespread use and availability of social media has created new ways to gather customer reactions swiftly and inexpensively. Recently, to move a project forward, we needed quick feedback from our customers about two possible designs of an online experience. We decided to try posting both designs on our closed Facebook group of debt management customers. Within 24 hours, more than 100 people commented, providing specific feedback about their likes and dislikes. Overwhelmingly, they liked one version, which happened to be the simpler version to create.
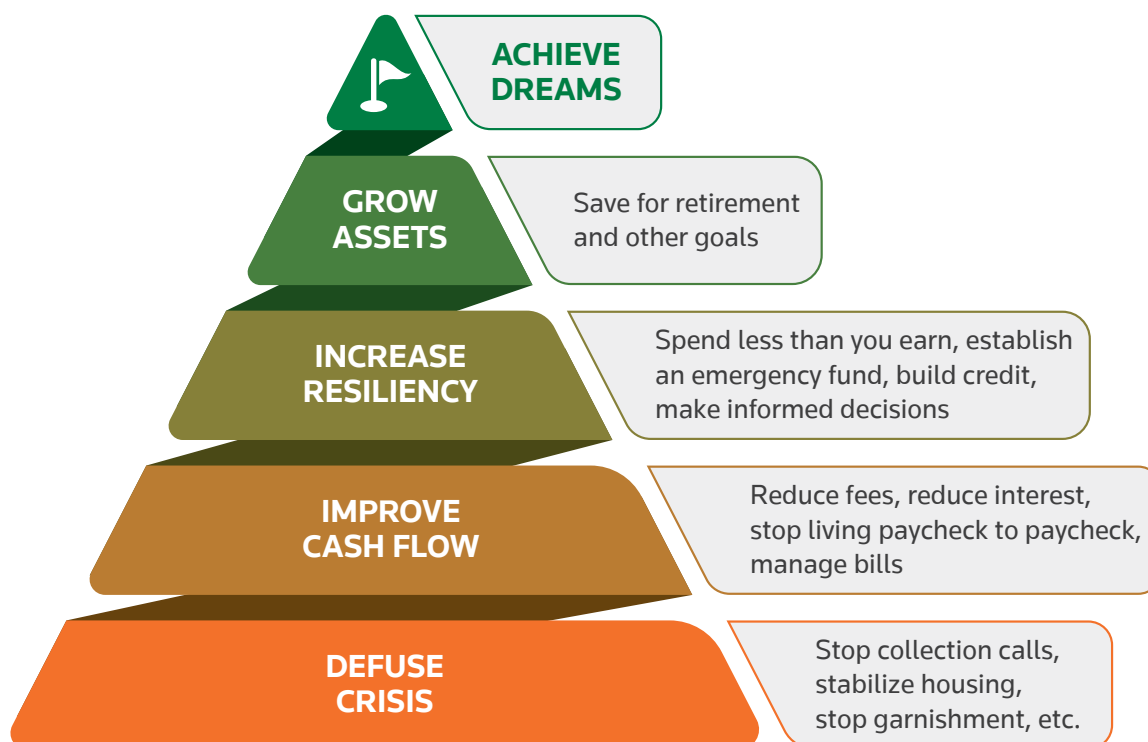
Maintain a Beginner's Mindset Regarding Customers

Even though non-profits are often viewed as experts on the people they serve, we don't always know our customers as well as we could. We often have false narratives, biases, or an incomplete understanding about the people we serve. Sometimes we simply apply the wrong frameworks to customers when we think about how to do our best work. It's important to shed any preconceived notions about customers and find ways to listen, and hear, their challenges and needs.

Focus on Customer Outcomes

Perhaps most importantly, we want to ensure our work is helping people improve their financial lives. We developed the below hierarchy to keep our big-picture focus on helping people achieve their financial dreams.

Financial wellness means helping people progress toward their financial dreams.

ACHIEVE DREAMS

GROW ASSETS — Save for retirement and other goals

INCREASE RESILIENCY — Spend less than you earn, establish an emergency fund, build credit, make informed decisions

IMPROVE CASH FLOW — Reduce fees, reduce interest, stop living paycheck to paycheck, manage bills

DEFUSE CRISIS — Stop collection calls, stabilize housing, stop garnishment, etc.

We review our customer feedback, and our potential programs and services, through this framework. We want to help customers through crises, and we are keenly focused on offering tools that can help move them up the pyramid.

Consumer protection is another important element of focusing on customer outcomes. When we were in the prototyping, rapid iteration phase with EarnUp, both of our organizations closely monitored the service, always with the lens of whether it was helping customers. We were listening to calls from beginning to end, ensuring the customer understood and agreed to the product, and identifying any little thing that could be a customer service issue. Once we determined we wanted to move beyond the prototype phase, we needed new processes to scale. We worked with EarnUp to define reports that would allow us to monitor service levels and relevant customer outcomes. We also do secret shopping and pick random monthly statements to ensure all aspects of the customer relationship are being handled appropriately.

Engage Staff

To increase engagement, we also have made a more concerted effort to solicit staff insights. Most of our 500 employees work with customers every day, and they have deep knowledge about customers' experiences with GreenPath. In addition to engaging staff more regularly in the process of thinking through what works for customers, we also asked them to enroll in some of our services so they could weigh in as customers themselves.

The Rose-Thorn-Bud framework[3] is a favorite across the organization, and can be used in a variety of ways. This simple exercise is particularly helpful in obtaining feedback from all participants, finding themes, and identifying concerns and opportunities.

We provided incentives for staff enrollments. We had several employees journal about their entire experience. Plus, we provided a variety of ways to collect feedback: surveys, one-on-ones, and lunch-and-shares. Staff feedback has been invaluable and has led to several improvements. In retrospect, we wish we would have asked staff to enroll in the service earlier – their feedback substantially sped up our learning process. Plus, having used the service themselves, staff are more comfortable explaining it to customers.

After we had been testing three different prototypes for several months, we brought a group together for a half-day of reflection. One activity we used was Rose (strengths), Thorn(challenges), and Bud (opportunities). On post-it notes, team members wrote what they liked about the service, what they didn't like, and opportunities for improvement. We then grouped the feedback and discussed themes.

[3] For more information see "Rose-Bud-Thorn" from the LUMA Institute book: Innovating for People: Handbook of Human-Centered Design Methods.

Pilot: Determine Success or Failure

*Set success metrics early,
but allow them to evolve over time.*

> *"It's easy to fall into the trap of not fully defining success metrics before diving into the pilot, especially with our move-fast approach. But understanding what success means to both organizations is critical to long-term improvements. We were sure to discuss these upfront and continue to revisit them as the partnership evolved."*
>
> *– Matthew Cooper, Co-Founder and CEO, EarnUp*

Success depends on positive outcomes for customers and partners alike.

From the beginning, we believed the Simple Payment Plan would be a good solution for some of GreenPath's customers. We believed it would address our desire to offer more solutions to help more people over the long-term.

For this partnership, our goals were to:

- Enroll customers whom the product would help,
- Ensure customers stayed enrolled in the service and found value,
- Scale the solution within GreenPath, and
- Encourage other organizations to offer the Simple Payment Plan to their customers as well.

We believed an effective solution would also provide enough revenue to both EarnUp and GreenPath for the partnership to be successful for both parties.

> *With GreenPath, we do more than offer a product. We offer that comprehensive experience for the customer. Someone to talk to, to help solve their financial problem.*
>
> *– Michael V, Account Manager, EarnUp*

Our Path

We were learning as we were going. We believed that if we were agile and let the right processes emerge, we'd get to the right answer. The success of the Simple Payment Plan shows we have.

Action Items

Build a Case for the Win-Win-Win	Track Appropriate Metrics	Determine Viability
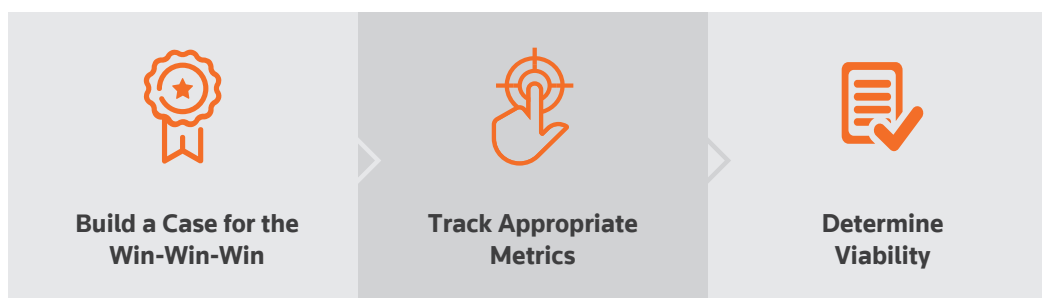
Build a Case for the Win-Win-Win

A solution must be geared toward improving people's lives – that's the first win. But to be sustainable, the product or service must be a "win" for both partners as well – a win-win-win.

In our partnership with EarnUp, we had good reason to believe the Simple Payment Plan would be a win for customers. We knew many of the customers who were graduating from our debt management program could use ongoing support. And we knew we could be serving more customers who weren't a fit for our other existing services. EarnUp wanted to find a way to reach more people who needed help managing their debts, so the revenue sharing opportunity seemed clear. All of these factors combined to give us confidence that there was a viable revenue model for both GreenPath and EarnUp that could make people's lives better.

There may be times when the customer benefit of a service is clear, but the revenue model is not. In that case, it may be necessary to look for other ways to fund the service, to ensure it is sustainable. Can it be rolled into another funded service? Are grant or investor funds available to learn more about outcomes and return on investment?

> *"Win-win-win isn't optional. It's critical for a strong, sustainable partnership."*
>
> *– Rick Bialobrzeski, EVP, GreenPath*

Track Appropriate Metrics

> *The data provides information that is more accurate than the gut-feel. Should we be investing in this or not?*
>
> *– Donna McNeill, COO, GreenPath*

We learned through our partnership with EarnUp how important it is to set realistic goals and track the appropriate metrics, and to keep the goals and metrics visible to both partners. It's critical that partners are aligned on these metrics.

Total addressable market

# of people who need the service

# of people offered the service

# of people who show interest

enrolled

stay en-rolled

Throughout our partnership, we gathered data on the number of people who were offered the solution, showed interest, enrolled in the service, and stayed enrolled for a period of time (see illustration on previous page). We recognized that improvements at any point in the process could boost sustainability of the service, and this provided multiple entry points for tweaks.

Determine Viability

Based on enrollment results, feedback from our front-line team members, and interviews with customers, we determined that the Simple Payment Plan was scalable. In March 2017, after four months of testing, we moved from prototyping to full pilot, believing the product would be fully operationalized within GreenPath.

We are excited by the early results of the partnership, and while much of our data is proprietary, the basic facts are promising: The first 125 customers enrolled in the program included $9.3 million loan dollars, in aggregate. By using the Simple Payment Plan, these customers have the potential to save a total of $600,000 in accrued interest and fees.*

Over a 10 month period, we tested three partnerships. Our partnership with EarnUp was the first to scale, likely because it has the clearest win-win-win. The Simple Payment Plan helps people by simplifying their bill payment process, saving them time and, potentially, money.* There is real value to GreenPath, providing another way to engage customers over the longer-term. The partnership also benefits EarnUp, providing access to customers who will benefit from their technology solution.

*All savings figures are estimates only and are based on example loan information. Savings calculated are net of fees ($19.95/month) and occur as a result of extra payments made towards principal. The loan must be paid to completion in order to realize the savings. There is no change to the terms and conditions of your loan. Actual results may vary.

Concluding Thoughts

In early fall 2016, two mission-driven soul-mates found each other. By the spring of 2017, they made their partnership official. Today, they are working to scale.

> *EarnUp has been a great partner in this. I like the people over there, and I like working with them. We know what we want to accomplish together. We don't exactly know how to get there, so we're figuring it out together. That's a really cool experience.*
>
> *– Jeremy Lark, Senior Manager of Client Services, GreenPath.*

We are now moving to scale the Simple Payment Plan and operationalize it throughout our entire organization. While this is no small undertaking, it has been a pleasure, in the midst of this effort, to reflect back on the history of our partnership with EarnUp. We believe the insights we have shared, about what has and has not worked for GreenPath, will help other organizations approach strategic partnerships with greater awareness of the potential opportunities and challenges that may arise.

We have tried to describe some of the ways in which we shifted our culture and re-focused our business to make our partnerships more successful. This critical point bears repeating: Having a culture open to innovation is a prerequisite to partnerships. We recommend you use the following questions to assess whether your organization has a culture that will support innovation:

• **Do we have a clear vision for the future?**

• **Have we set organizational milestones to achieve that vision?**

• **Are staff empowered to innovate?**

• **Do we embrace missteps and make it okay to fail?**

If the answer to any of these questions is "no," we urge you to focus on the culture change needed to set your organization up for success before seriously pursuing any partnerships.

Finally, we believe a culture of innovation is the starting point, and a culture that supports learning is essential for any organization's ongoing success. At GreenPath, we will always be learning, and we look forward to sharing more of our lessons and insights with you in the future. We are eager to learn from your experiences as well.

About Us

GreenPath Financial Wellness is a national nonprofit organization that provides financial counseling, education and products to empower people to lead financially healthy lives. In working directly with individuals, and through partnerships with other organizations, GreenPath aims to remix the American dream so it works for everyone. Headquartered in Farmington Hills, Mich., GreenPath has nearly 500 employees and operates about 60 branch offices in 19 states. GreenPath is a member of the National Foundation for Credit Counseling (NFCC), and is accredited by the Council on Accreditation (COA). For more information, visit www.greenpath.org.

EarnUp is a Forbes Fintech 50 winner offering a consumer-first platform that intelligently automates loan payments and identifies earning opportunities for the 200 million indebted Americans. EarnUp puts a few dollars aside for loans when consumers can afford it—then makes timely payments to help consumers get out of debt faster. Based in San Francisco, EarnUp is backed by prominent venture capital firms SignalFire, Blumberg Capital, Ulu Ventures, Kapor Capital, Correlation Ventures, Camp One Ventures, and Fenway Summer Ventures plus other leading angels and entrepreneurs. EarnUp is a grantee of the prestigious Financial Solutions Lab sponsored by JPMorgan Chase & Co. and the Center for Financial Services Innovation. For more information, visit www.earnup.com, email hello@earnup.com, and follow on Twitter @EarnUp.