



How fintechs can drive growth through card programs

Using cards to grow revenue, build loyalty and stand out in a crowded market



Card programs are no longer simply a payment tool — they're strategic growth engines. Done right, they unlock new revenue streams, deeper customer engagement, powerful data insights and long-term competitive advantage.

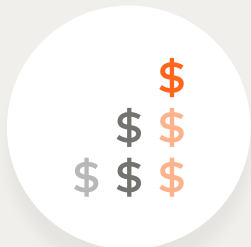
This piece explores:

- Why fintechs could consider launching a card program
- Key factors to weigh before launch
- How to manage the card lifecycle
- Real-world case studies proving impact
- Modern features and use cases shaping the future





Why start a card program?



Revenue and growth

Card programs create multiple dependable revenue streams, from interchange fees and interest to annual charges. Co-branded partnerships extend market reach, and vertical-specific opportunities unlock new pathways for scalable growth.



Customer engagement and loyalty

When a card becomes part of daily spending, it builds habit and loyalty. Cashback and rewards encourage regular use, cross-selling boosts lifetime value, and specialized cards — for example eco-friendly, crypto, or freelancer-focused — deepen engagement by matching customer needs.



Data insights and analytics

Owning customer spend data is a major advantage. It enables personalized offers, smarter product design and better credit decisions. These insights also support stronger loyalty programs and healthier margins.

What to consider before launch

Launching a card program requires balance across compliance, partnerships, customer experience, risk and technology. Each decision shapes both trust and profitability.



Compliance and partnerships

Trusted partnerships and a strong regulatory footing are essential. Fintechs may secure licenses themselves or work with partners to bridge gaps. Banks, card networks and processors provide speed and resilience. While partnerships fuel growth, responsibility for oversight ultimately remains with the fintech. The most effective partners are those flexible enough to adapt to evolving regulations, markets and customer needs without slowing progress.



Product and customer experience

Define your audience — consumers, small businesses or enterprises — and align the card type and value proposition. Smooth onboarding, instance issuance, transparent pricing and reliable support all help build trust. Choices like whether to make cards physical or virtual, premium or utility all work to reinforce positioning.



Risk and economics

Fraud controls such as monitoring and 3-D Secure must be built in from the very start. Credit programs require solid underwriting, limits and collections. Financial discipline matters — revenue projections must be weighed against network, processing, compliance and support costs. Unit economics, including break-even points and time-to-profitability, are key in sustainable scaling.



Technology and future growth

API-first partners and seamless integration with ledger, settlement and reconciliation systems work to enable growth. User experience should be frictionless with intuitive apps, instant issuance and reliable support. Strategic planning should account for partners who can support cross-border expansion, technology change, regulatory shifts and more.



Managing the card lifecycle

Long-term success requires paying attention to the entire customer journey: acquisition, activation, usage, monetization and retention.



Acquisition and activation

Effective programs use targeted campaigns, partnerships and co-branding to expand reach. Fast onboarding, with digital applications, instant KYC and instant issuance reduces friction. Encouraging early use with nudges or immediate rewards helps the card quickly become part of daily life.



Usage and monetization

Convenience drives usage. Wallet integration, ATM access, reloads and bill pay make cards indispensable. Monetization should go beyond interchange, using fees and value-added services to strengthen economics.



Retention and expansion

Retention depends on active portfolio management and ongoing innovation. Loyalty ecosystems, virtual cards and advances controls help reduce churn. Upselling into premium tiers or adjacent financial products grows share of wallet and improves margins.



Examples from Episode Six's customer partnership

Payroll cards for a fast-growing HR platform



Why start?

A payroll and HR platform launched a prepaid Mastercard to give employees instant access to wages and create new revenue streams from card usage. This feature quickly became a differentiator in a crowded HR tech market.



Pre-launch

The program was built on strong compliance (FINTRAC KYC/ AML, disclosures) and strategic partnerships with a BIN sponsor and issuing bank. Card issuance was seamlessly embedded into the platform with multilingual onboarding and branded support.



Lifecycle

- **Activation:** Campaigns focused on benefits like instant pay and free ATM withdrawals, driving rapid adoption among gig and hourly workers.
- **Engagement:** Wallet integration and card controls encouraged daily use.
- **Lesson:** Benefit-driven messaging outperformed feature-focused campaigns.

● RESULT

The initiative enhanced employee financial wellness, created a new stream of recurring revenue for the platform and reinforced the company's market position.

Reinventing tax refund disbursements

Payroll cards for a fast-growing HR platform



Why start?

A national tax preparation firm modernized refund delivery with prepaid cards, turning slow cheque-based refunds into instant, digital-first disbursements that built trust and loyalty.

Pre-launch

To handle seasonal demand, the firm launched with a fully compliant partner stack (issuing bank, processor, KYC, digital interfaces). Clients received biometric verification, instant provisioning and multiple payout options.

Lifecycle

- **Adoption:** In the first season, 50,000+ cards carried \$100 million in refunds, with transactions scaling 139x in peak months.
- **Efficiency:** Mobile-first onboarding cut registration time by 70%.
- **Retention:** Virtual cards via SMS/email reduced compliance friction while maintaining speed.

● RESULT

The initiative delivered a faster, more secure refund experience that strengthened customer satisfaction and positioned the firm as a category innovator.

Features of modern card programs and use cases

By combining software with payments, cards have evolved from static plastic into programmable financial tools. This shift empowers fintechs — not just to move money, but to design entire business models around flexibility, control and customer experience.

Category	Overview	Examples
Card issuance and control	How cards are created and managed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instant virtual/physical issuance• Dynamic card numbers• Spend controls Freeze/unfreeze• Flexible account structures
Smart transaction processing	Intelligence in transaction approval and insights	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Real-time decisioning• Fraud/loyalty rules• Rich data feeds• Spend alerts
Funding and money movement	Flexible ways to move and settle fund	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• JIT funding• Multiple funding sources (bank, wallet, crypto)• Instant payouts and refund
Program and developer infrastructure	Compliance, oversight and tools for builders	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• KYC/AML• White-label apps• Custom rewards• Real-time APIs• Cloud-native• Digital ledger



Sample card use cases

Expense management	Instant cards + smart controls
Gig economy	Instant wage access
Digital banks	Quick issuance + app-first controls
Lending	Loans disbursed instantly
Rewards and loyalty	Real-time cashback
Marketplaces	Easy vendor payouts
Travel	Secure booking + perks
Insurance/Healthcare	Instant claims + benefits

Takeaways

Card programs today are more than just tools for making payments. They're engines for growth that can bring in new revenue, keep customers loyal and generate insights that spark innovation. But winning in this space takes focus. Fintechs need to nail compliance, partnerships, product design, risk management and day-to-day execution. Those that combine strong infrastructure with intuitive customer experiences will lead, securing lasting market share and long-term advantage.

The good news is that fintechs don't have to do it alone. Mastercard's Product Express program helps innovators quickly bring card programs to market with the compliance, scalability and reach they need.

Paired with Episode Six's flexible next-gen issuing platform, fintechs can design differentiated, customer-first experiences that set them apart.

● NEXT STEPS

Learn more about how our solutions can power your card program:

- Mastercard's Product Express Program
- Episode Six's Modern Issuing Platform





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