

## 2023 Future Forward Award Winning Nomination

### Winner: Escalent & Merrill

**Team:** Chad King, Vice President / Laura Winebarger, Insights Consultant / Devon Witherell, Insights Manager / Tony Rodriguez, Data Scientist / Ray Reno, Sr. VP Data Sciences / Rob Darrow, Sr. Director Qualitative / Brian Shaw, Head of Wealth Strategy / Larry Necowitz, Sr. VP Digital Research / Jennifer Auerbach Rodriguez, Head of Strategic Growth Markets / Julie Smith, Business Strategy & Initiatives Manager / Carole Booth, Digital Channel Executive / Mark Goldstein, Sr. VP Modeling & AI / Sara Snider, Director Team & Practice Management Consulting / Lynn Bircsak, Sr. VP Client & FA Research

Market volatility, rising interest rates, geopolitical uncertainty, and investors' financial complexities have increased the demand for professional financial advisors. While many affluent Americans work with a financial advisor today, one-third do not and according to recent research nearly half of all unadvised individuals are now taking the search for an advisor more seriously. But finding the right financial advisor isn't always easy. Meaningful advised relationships involve much more than sound financial management and advice alone. Investors want to feel like their advisor truly knows them and understands their needs and goals beyond portfolio performance. And the data shows there is a need for a modern, innovative approach for finding an advisor. Among affluent Americans not working with an advisor:

- 22% say they don't know how to find the right advisor,
- 14% say reaching out to an advisor is intimidating, and
- 10% say they can't find one who understands their unique needs.

To solve for this need, many companies have created digital tools to "match" investors with an advisor. However, these tools aren't truly designed to help investors find a strong advisor match. They rely on proximity and filtering criteria to present the investor with a set of participating advisors in their geographic area. Finding a successful match requires alignment on other dimensions of compatibility, such as communication, guidance, and engagement styles, as well as an appropriate mix of sociability and expertise.

Recognizing this gap in the industry, Merrill partnered with Escalent in late 2019 to develop a truly innovative financial advisor-investor compatibility matching tool. A multi-phased research and development framework was constructed and over the course of 2020, Merrill and Escalent executed six research studies with clients and advisors – four qualitative and two quantitative – to dig deeply into what attributes contribute to a strong match between advisors and investors beyond proximity alone.

What we learned was that not all investors seek the same traits in an advisor. It was hypothesized that by understanding which dimensions were most impactful and differentiating, investors could get paired with a strong match from the start, saving them from having to randomly search for and meet with multiple advisors before choosing one.

During 2021 the compatibility matching tool 'Merrill Advisor Match' was developed using the robust insights unlocked over the six research studies. The tool was repeatedly tested, validated and refined to maximize both efficacy and user experience. This refinement included the development of a custom scenario simulator capable of repeatedly testing over 10 million matching outcomes per run as part of the testing and validation process. Additionally, leading up to Q3'22 public launch, UX research was conducted to further optimize the user experience. This additional testing, research and interactive refinement was done to ensure that Merrill would deliver on a truly innovative, engaging, and effective compatibility-based advisor matching tool.

Merrill Advisor Match solves several industry challenges. Specifically, it:

- Democratizes access to financial advice by using an online platform that anyone can access
- Demystifies the experience of finding a financial advisor through a simple, intuitive, short online questionnaire
- Modernizes the approach to connecting with a financial advisor that is appealing to all generations and in line to what people have come to expect from other industries
- Places digital and personalization at the forefront of wealth management in an industry leading move

In September of 2022 Merrill Advisor Match was launched to the public with great success. Roughly six months post-launch, the extensive research and development has paid off. Thousands of people have taken the questionnaire and the window of time from when someone connects with an advisor to becoming a client is significantly reduced, underscoring the tool's ability to connect people based on meaningful attributes. And the Advisor Match tool has been able to more than triple Merrill's prospect to client digital conversion rate. Finally, we are finding that many of the people connecting with an advisor are doing so for the first time, delivering on Merrill Advisor Match's promise to increase access to advice.

Merrill Advisor Match site URL: <https://www.ml.com/advisormatch.html>

[About Merrill Advisor Match](#)