



CREDIT UNION INNOVATION


STUDY

The Credit Union Innovation Study, a PYMNTS and PSCU collaboration, provides a big-picture analysis of the current state of credit union innovation in the United States. We surveyed a census-balanced panel of 5,239 U.S. consumers, 100 credit union decision-makers and 50 FinTech executives to learn which types of contactless payment innovations CU members would like their CUs to prioritize and discover whether credit unions are investing in these areas of interest.

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The Credit Union Innovation Study was done in collaboration with PSCU, and PYMNTS is grateful for the company's support and insight. [PYMNTS.com](https://pymnts.com) retains full editorial control over the following findings, methodology and data analysis.

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Members' relationships with their credit unions (CUs) were radically and permanently altered in March 2020, and CUs' approaches to innovation were forced to change at the same time. The pandemic prompted CUs across the nation to close their brick-and-mortar branches and transition to interacting with their members primarily and often solely online. The result was a nationwide wave of CU innovation that quickly — and permanently — raised members' digital banking expectations.

It has now been 16 months since CUs first began kicking their innovation strategies into high gear, and their innovation fervor shows no sign of slowing. PYMNTS' latest research, conducted in collabora-

tion with PSCU, suggests that many CUs are implementing more innovations faster than ever to keep members satisfied. The strong majority of CUs are aiming to bring new products to market before competitors or shortly after observing market trends, and members are happier with their CUs' innovation performances than they have ever been. Eighty percent of all members now say their credit unions innovate "somewhat" to "very" well, a 6.5 percent jump from when we first began studying the CU innovation space in 2018.

The bar for new digital product and service rollouts could not be higher, and credit unions will need to keep up with the pace of innovation that the market demands if they hope to keep the ground

they have gained in this evolving market. The trouble is that many still struggle with lingering innovation barriers, including a lack of digital resources. Sixty-three percent of CUs lack the data analytics they need to provide the customized product offerings their members expect, and 51 percent say their core systems prevent them from implementing the innovations they want. Credit unions must change these internal processes and overcome their core system limitations to keep up in this accelerated digital environment.

The 2021 edition of the Credit Union Innovation Study details the findings of our extensive research. We surveyed a census-balanced panel of 5,239 United States consumers about their relation-

ships with their primary banks and credit unions, along with panels of 100 credit union decision-makers and 50 FinTech executives, from April 26 to May 24 to learn how the sweeping changes that have reshaped the financial industry over the past year are redefining the complex relationships that CUs and other FIs have with their members. Our researchers aimed to determine how CUs are measuring up on innovation, to identify what is holding them back from achieving their members' expectations and to explain how they can overcome these challenges.

This is what we learned.

TRUST IS NOW CONSUMERS' TOP PRIORITY FOR CHOOSING FIs.

CU members are 38 percent more likely to choose their FIs because of trust than they are to choose them for their physical locations.

Convenient branch locations were once the first thing that consumers looked for in a bank or credit union, but that changed in 2020. The share of consumers who said they chose where to bank based on convenient branch locations dropped precipitously from 67 percent to 57 percent after FIs across the nation closed or implemented capacity restrictions, and there is no sign that in-branch banking will recover. The share of consumers who choose their FIs for location has dropped even further in recent months. Just 55 percent of consumers choose where to bank at least in part based on an FI's location now, even though FIs across the nation are once again operating at full or near-full capacity.

The number of consumers who choose FIs based on their locations has dropped so much in the past two years, in fact, that location is no longer the most common factor that consumers consider when it comes to choosing where to bank — trust is. The average consumer is now 7.6 percent more likely to choose where to bank based on the trust they have in their FI than an FI's physical branch location. This gap is wider among CU members, for whom location has always come second to trust. Credit union members are now 38 percent likelier to choose their FIs based on trust than on location. This not only underscores how important it is for credit unions to build strong relationships with their members as physical branches grow less central to their banking lives but also presents an opportunity for CUs to gain a competitive edge against banks and FinTechs as trust in financial institutions grows more important to consumers across the board.



FOURTEEN PERCENT OF ALL CUs NOW SEE THEMSELVES AS INNOVATION LEADERS — ALMOST FOUR TIMES AS MANY AS DID IN 2018.

More CUs than ever say they are making digital innovation a key focus. Fourteen percent of credit unions consider themselves to be innovation leaders, meaning they are working to develop and launch new products to market before their competitors. This makes 2021 the fourth consecutive year in which the share of CUs that prioritize quick times to market has increased. Almost four times as many CUs now say they are working to launch new products before their competitors than four years ago.

Far more CUs than ever before are investing to expand their digital capabilities. The number of credit unions investing in digital innovation has dramatically increased over the past two years, especially in four key areas: loyalty and rewards programs, security and authentication, customized product offerings and planning and budgeting tools. The share of CUs investing in customized product offerings, data security and authentication capabilities and planning and budgeting tools all more than doubled between 2020 and 2021, and the share investing in loyalty and rewards programs has increased 27 percent over the last year. More credit unions are also investing in both contactless cards and voice assistants, with roughly 42 percent and 27 percent doing so, respectively.



CU MEMBERS ARE MORE SATISFIED WITH THEIR CUs' INNOVATION PERFORMANCES THAN THEY HAVE EVER BEEN. Eighty percent of CU members are now highly satisfied with their CUs' innovations, and 11 percent fewer CU members would switch FIs over innovation than said so a year ago.

Credit unions' proclamations about focusing on innovation are more than just hot air. Most are backing up their talk, and their members are taking notice. Eighty percent of all CU members now say that their CUs are implementing innovations "somewhat" to "very" well — up 3 percent from last year. This is also the fourth consecutive year in which members have grown more satisfied with their CUs' innovation levels: Overall satisfaction has increased 6.5 percent since 2018.

This emphasis that CUs are putting on innovation is paying off. CU members' willingness to switch FIs over innovation is dropping because members are growing more satisfied with their current CUs on innovation. Only 20 percent of all CU members now say they would consider leaving their current CUs over innovation — down 11 percent from last year. The more satisfied CU members are on innovation, the less likely they are to leave. Eighteen percent of CU members who are "very" or "extremely" satisfied with their CUs' innovations say they would switch FIs over the matter, and 33 percent who are "somewhat" satisfied or less would do the same.

This does not mean that CUs should stop investing in innovation, however — this actually suggests the opposite. Twenty percent of members are still at risk of leaving their CUs if they do not innovate as quickly as they want, and 25 percent of non-CU members — bank and FinTech customers — might be willing to sign with other institutions if they can deliver innovations that they cannot get with their current FIs. Credit unions must therefore be able to match the fast pace of innovation that the market now demands if they hope to keep their members satisfied, reduce the risk of losing them and win over new members from competing FIs.

MANY CUs ARE STILL STRUGGLING TO TACKLE INTERNAL PROCESSES THAT CAN MAKE INNOVATION MORE EFFECTIVE IN THE LONG RUN. Pandemic-related changes, bureaucracy and inadequate technical resources are still holding many CUs back from innovating as effectively as they must.

Several key frictions are keeping CUs from reaching their full innovation potential. These frictions fall into three broad, interconnected categories: rapid and sweeping market changes, bureaucratic processes and inadequate technical resources. The first of these categories relate to the acceleration of market trends triggered after March 2020. The pandemic not only radically altered members' expectations of their CUs but also forced many CUs to utilize a decentralized workforce in which staff worked primarily from home — and it did so promptly. The changes were so sweeping that, after 15 months, many CUs are still struggling to adjust. Ninety-six percent of CUs say that having employees work from home is hindering their innovation efforts, and 90 percent say that they are still struggling to innovate as quickly as they need to keep up with consumers' rapidly changing demands.



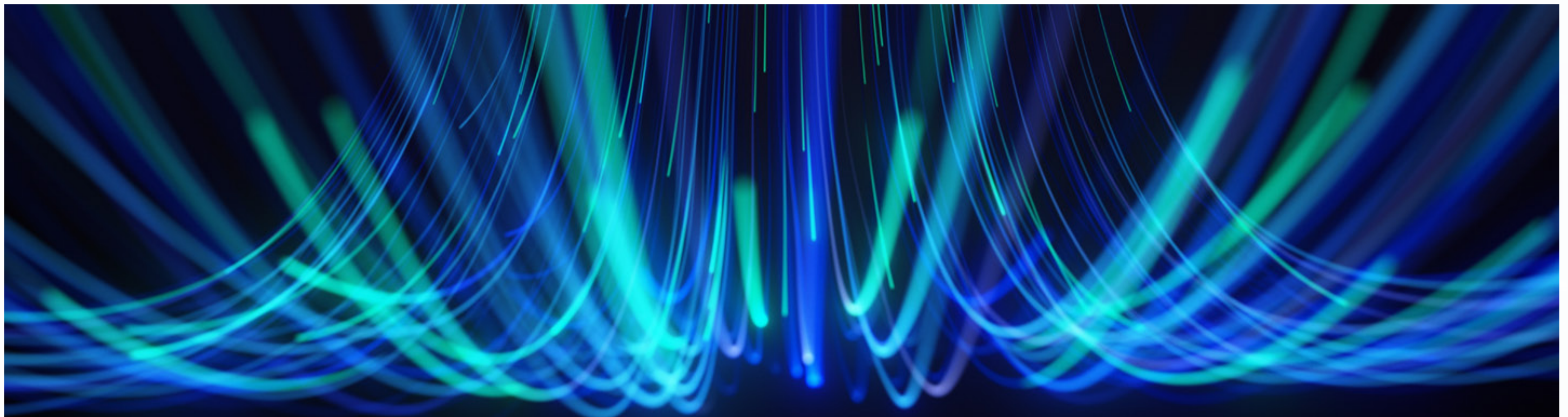
The second of these innovation frictions is bureaucracy, broadly referring to the internal and external review processes that are preventing CUs from keeping up with the speed of market changes. Seventy-seven percent of CUs say that their own internal review processes are so complex and multifaceted that they impede CUs' ability to bring new products to market as quickly as needed. Sixty-four percent of CUs say that regulations and compliance are preventing them from innovating as speedily as they could. This signals a widespread need to streamline and accelerate review processes to ensure bureaucratic barriers do not prevent CUs from delivering the innovations necessary to meet members' expectations and maintain a competitive edge.

The third of these categories is arguably the one that CUs have the most power to change: a lack of adequate technical resources. Sixty-three percent of CUs say they lack the data analytics capabilities they need to tailor their offerings to member demand, and 51 percent of CUs say that their core systems are preventing them from bringing innovations to market as quickly as necessary. Not having these technical resources makes CUs less capable of tackling the other key innovation barriers that stand in their way. Acquiring more sophisticated data analytics tools and improving their core systems' functionalities can not only help them more simply meet their regulatory requirements and accelerate their internal review processes but also help them cut down their innovations' time to market and keep up with this rapidly evolving financial ecosystem.

NINETY-EIGHT PERCENT OF CUs INNOVATE TO BOOST THEIR REVENUES, WHILE 89 PERCENT DO SO TO CUT COSTS.

There is a very real financial cost to not innovating fast enough, according to CU decision-makers. CUs are driven to innovate foremost to boost their financial performance, and this is illustrated by how they measure the return on investment (ROI) of innovations. The most common metric CU decision-makers say they use to evaluate an innovation's success is whether it increases members' demand for higher-margin services, as 79 percent say they consider innovations to be successful if they help drive this demand. The second- and third-most common metrics that CUs use to measure ROI also center on improving financial performance: reduced business risk and decreased operating costs. Sixty-seven percent and 58 percent of CU decision-makers assess innovations' effectiveness by whether they reduce business risk via greater security and whether they decrease their operating costs, respectively.

This strongly suggests that credit unions are being driven to innovate by more than just a desire to meet their members' evolving expectations, though that is undoubtedly one of their key drivers. Our research shows that there is a very real need for CUs to improve their financial resiliency, evidenced by how many measure innovations' successes in terms of their financial impacts.



BEYOND THE BRANCH

There was a time not too long ago when a conveniently located physical branch was the most important offering an FI could provide, but 2020 changed the game entirely. Fifteen percent fewer consumers chose their financial institutions in part for their physical branch locations in 2020 than did in 2019, in fact, and that share has yet to recover. Consumers’ consideration of physical branches has since dropped even lower. Fifty-five percent of all consumers now say they choose where to bank at least in part because of convenient physical branch locations — a majority, but 17 percent less than the share that said the same just two years ago.

Table 1:
How consumers choose where to bank
Share who consider select factors when choosing FIs, by year

	2018	2019	2020	2021
Trust	56.6%	53.1%	64.3%	59.6%
Conveniently located branches	66.0%	66.6%	56.7%	55.4%
Easy online capabilities	41.3%	48.2%	45.5%	42.0%
Conveniently located ATMs	40.9%	41.6%	40.4%	39.1%
Helpful branch tellers	34.7%	34.8%	36.2%	35.5%
Cost effectiveness	38.8%	27.8%	33.8%	32.3%
Easy mobile app features	33.2%	37.6%	36.7%	31.8%
Refunded ATM fees	18.2%	15.5%	19.5%	17.1%
Technological innovation	22.9%	17.2%	19.0%	16.5%
Availability of digital biometric security capabilities	8.8%	7.7%	10.9%	9.9%
CUs' target demographic	-	-	9.2%	8.5%
Other	8.1%	9.5%	7.1%	6.7%

Source: PYMNTS | PSCU Credit Union Innovation Study

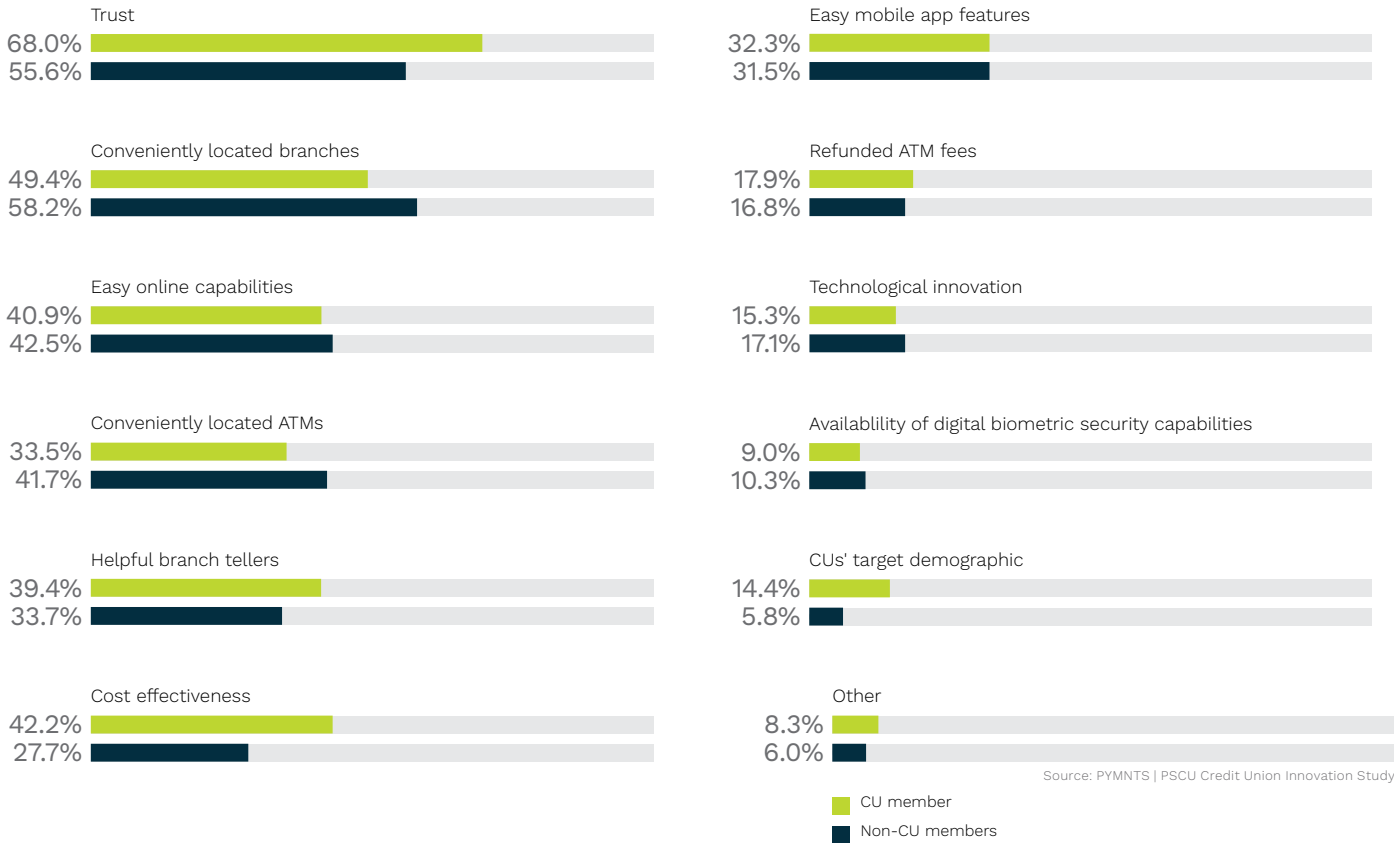
The new big issue for consumers looking for a new FI is trust. Trust has supplanted location as the most common factor that consumers consider when deciding where to bank, with consumers opting for the FIs in which they have the most confidence. Average consumers are now 8 percent more likely to choose to bank with an FI they trust than they are to join an FI with a convenient physical location, and the average CU member is 38 percent more likely to do so.

There are other factors that consumers look for when choosing FIs, of course, and many of them relate to FIs’ digital offerings. Forty-two percent of consumers choose their FIs in part for their easy online banking capabilities, for example, and 32 percent say that FIs’ mobile apps’ ease of use plays a role in their decision about where to bank. Another 17 percent look for FIs that focus on technological innovation, and 10 percent look for those that have digital biometric security capabilities. It is therefore clear that many consumers consider FIs’ digital offerings to be crucial to their overall banking experiences, even though trust comes first.

Trust is even more important to credit union members, for whom trust has always been the top factor. Sixty-eight percent of all CU members say they would choose an FI at least partly based on trust, while 49 percent would choose an FI based in part on whether it had a convenient branch location. This means that an estimated 45 million CU members would choose FIs for trust rather than for location.

CU members are also more likely than other financial customers to choose their FIs based on teller helpfulness, cost effectiveness and whether FIs are part of the communities around which their organizations are built. Educators might look to bank with credit unions with services tailored to teachers and professors, for example, while military members might gravitate toward credit unions that cater their offerings to those who serve. It follows that CU members would be 17 percent more likely than non-CU members to choose their FIs based on how helpful their tellers are. They are also 52 percent more likely than non-CU members to choose FIs for their cost effectiveness and almost three times more likely to choose FIs based on whether they are part of the communities to which the institutions cater.

Figure 1:
How CU members and non-CU members choose where to bank
Share who consider select factors when choosing FIs, CU members versus non-CU members



This community-focused outlook is especially important to members and is critical to providing the sense of trust they desire, but it does not preclude these FIs from having to provide the same digital offerings that other banks deliver. Credit unions must be able to build this sense of community while also delivering the digital capabilities that their members need to bank and transact in this increasingly digital ecosystem if they hope to gain and keep their members’ trust in the long run.



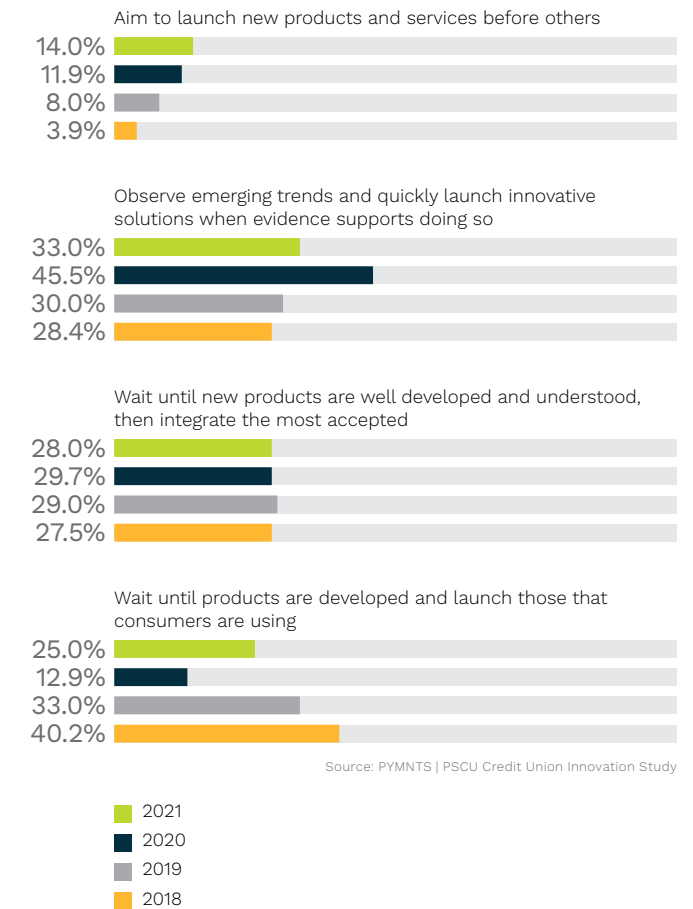
TAKING CHARGE ON

MEMBER-CENTRIC INNOVATION

Credit unions are more aware than ever of how important it is to deliver the digital products and services that their members consider central to their banking experiences, and they are taking active measures to meet those expectations. Nearly four times as many credit unions aim to bring new products to market faster than their competitors than did four years ago, with 14 percent now saying that beating their competitors to market is a priority. This figure has been steadily increasing since 2018, illustrating the prolonged, concerted effort among many CUs to get on the cutting edge of innovation.

Not all CUs share this urgency, however: A massive uptick in the share of credit unions launching new innovations occurred in 2020, but this uptick has since reverted. Thirty percent of CUs considered themselves to be "fast followers" in 2019, and that figure that jumped to 46 percent in 2020 before dipping down to just 33 percent in 2021.

Figure 2:
How many credit unions consider themselves to be innovation leaders
Share of CUs that have select outlooks toward innovation, by year



Speed is not the only aspect of innovation processes that CUs have been working to improve, however. They are also investing in greater varieties of products, services and innovations than they have in the past.

There are four key innovation areas on which CUs are more focused than ever, and each centers on delivering services that can improve members’ everyday banking activities: loyalty and rewards,

security and authentication, customized product offerings and planning and budgeting tools. Loyalty and rewards programs are now the most common CU innovation investment area, with 98 percent of all credit unions having invested in loyalty and rewards programs over the last year — up 27 percent from 2020.

Credit unions have been even more devoted to increasing their budgets for

customized products, digital security and budgeting tool innovations. There are more than twice as many credit unions investing in all three of these innovation areas in 2021 than there were in 2020, indicating a sharp change in most CUs’ innovation focuses. This increased focus on budgeting tools and digital security coincided with a massive uptick in unemployment and growing consumer awareness of the data risks associated with transacting more online.¹

it was last year. These innovation areas correspond to consumers’ increased demands for transacting without having to make physical contact with cash or cards.²

These sweeping changes have coincided with massive cuts in investments for mobile banking capabilities, small business credit and real-time payments, to cite a few examples. Only about half as many credit unions are investing in mobile banking capabilities as did in 2020, and less than one-seventh as many are investing in real-time payments as just one year ago. Investments in installment credit and peer-to-peer (P2P) payments have also shrunk to just a fraction of what they were.

Table 2:
Which new products and services are getting CU funding
Share that cite select innovations as areas of investment, by year

	2018	2019	2020	2021
Loyalty or rewards programs	29.4%	33.0%	77.2%	98.0%
Customized product offerings for members	21.6%	10.0%	44.6%	97.0%
Security, authentication or digital identity	48.0%	35.0%	41.6%	93.0%
Planning or budgeting tools	39.2%	9.0%	38.6%	85.0%
Mobile wallets	53.9%	54.0%	86.1%	80.0%
Fraud management and anti-money laundering	71.6%	69.0%	44.6%	69.0%
Mobile banking capabilities	0.0%	77.0%	70.3%	43.0%
Contactless cards	20.6%	31.0%	33.7%	42.0%
Small business credit	0.0%	24.0%	67.3%	36.0%
Voice assistants	0.0%	18.0%	11.9%	27.0%
Real-time payments	71.6%	76.0%	14.9%	10.0%
Installment credit	19.6%	50.0%	28.7%	7.0%
Small to mid-sized business payroll	0.0%	0.0%	4.0%	5.0%
P2P payments	40.2%	40.0%	26.7%	4.0%

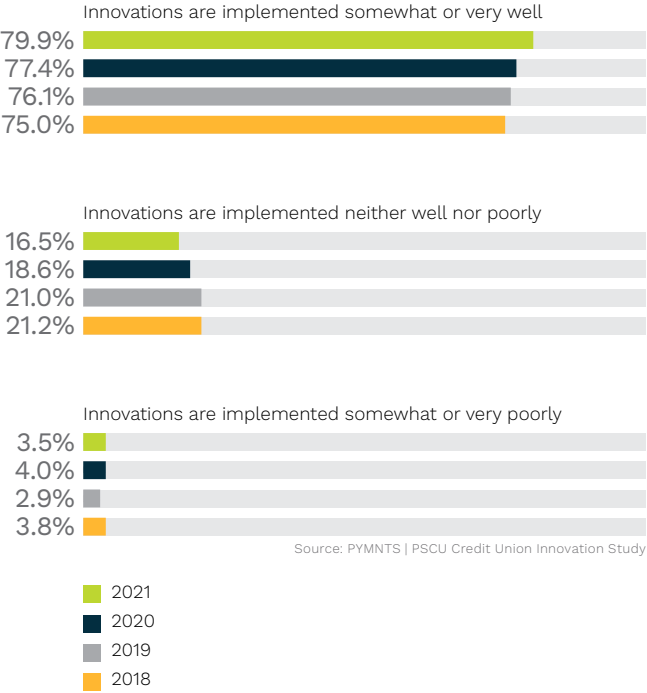
Source: PYMNTS | PSCU Credit Union Innovation Study

¹PYMNTS.com. The Bring-It-To-Me Economy. 2021. <https://www.pymnts.com/study/bring-it-to-me-economy-digital-marketplaces-aggregators-bridge-millennials/> Accessed June 2021.

²PYMNTS.com. How We Shop: Measuring The Rapid Digital Shift. 2020. <https://www.pymnts.com/study/the-how-we-shop-report-september-2020/>. Accessed June 2021.

HITTING THE MARK

Figure 3:
How members' innovation satisfaction has changed over time
Share exhibiting select levels of satisfaction with their primary FIs' innovation rollouts, by year



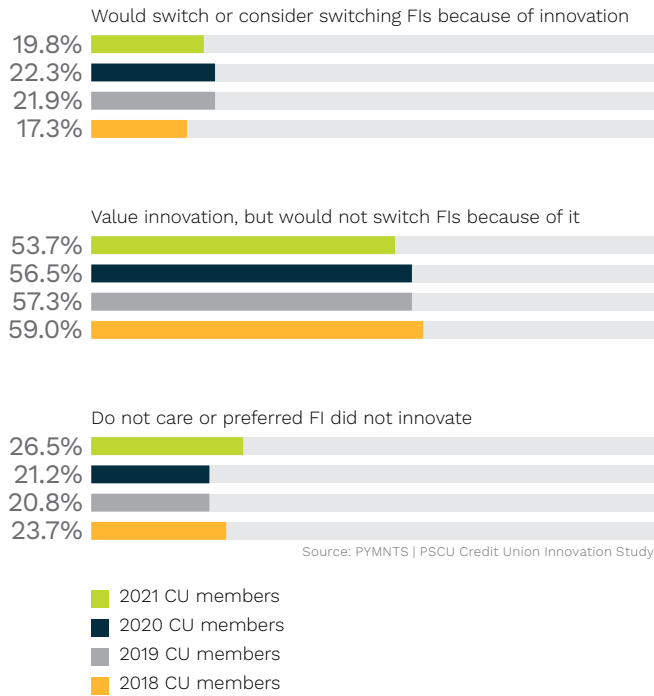
80%

OF MEMBERS NOW SAY THEIR CUs INNOVATE EITHER "SOMEWHAT" OR "VERY" WELL.

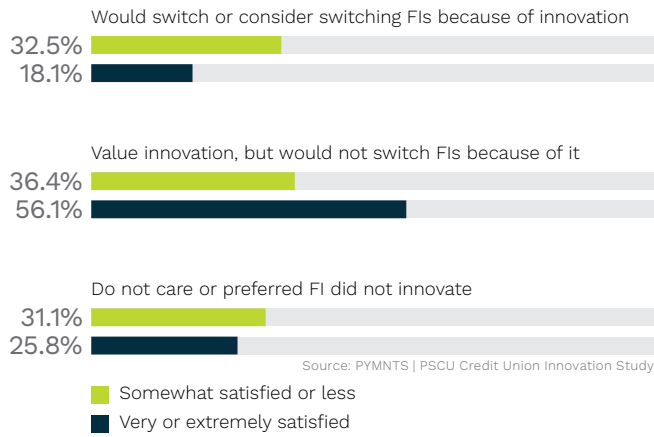
Credit unions' recent emphasis on consumer-centric innovation is paying off. Members are happier with their credit unions' innovation rollouts than they have ever been, with 80 percent of members saying that their credit unions innovate either "somewhat" or "very" well. This is the highest share of satisfied members we have seen in our four years of studying the credit union ecosystem, and it is also the fourth consecutive year in which members' satisfaction with their CUs' innovation performances has increased.

Members are also growing less interested in switching FIs over innovation as they grow more satisfied with their CUs' innovation rollouts. Eleven percent less members say they would either leave or consider leaving their current credit unions if they found another FI that could innovate more effectively than said so in 2020, and 25 percent more members say they do not care about innovation at all. It is no coincidence that this shift coincides with credit unions' new focus on member-centric innovation.

Figure 4:
How willing CU members are to switch FIs over innovation
4A: Share citing select attitudes toward credit unions’ innovations, by year



4B: Share citing select attitudes toward credit unions’ innovations, by satisfaction level



Members' willingness to switch FIs correlates with reduced satisfaction with their CUs' abilities to bring new products and services to market. Members who report feeling "somewhat" satisfied or less with their CUs' innovation levels are 80 percent more likely than "very" or "extremely" satisfied members to say they would at least consider switching FIs over innovation.

The inverse is also true: "Very" or "extremely" satisfied members are 54 percent more likely to say they value CU innovation but would not switch FIs over it than members who are only "somewhat" satisfied or less. This shows just how far innovation can go in helping credit unions maintain the trust they work so hard to build among their members.

20%

OF MEMBERS WOULD STILL AT LEAST CONSIDER SWITCHING FIs OVER INNOVATION.



BACK TO THE BALANCE SHEET: MEASURING INNOVATIVE SUCCESS

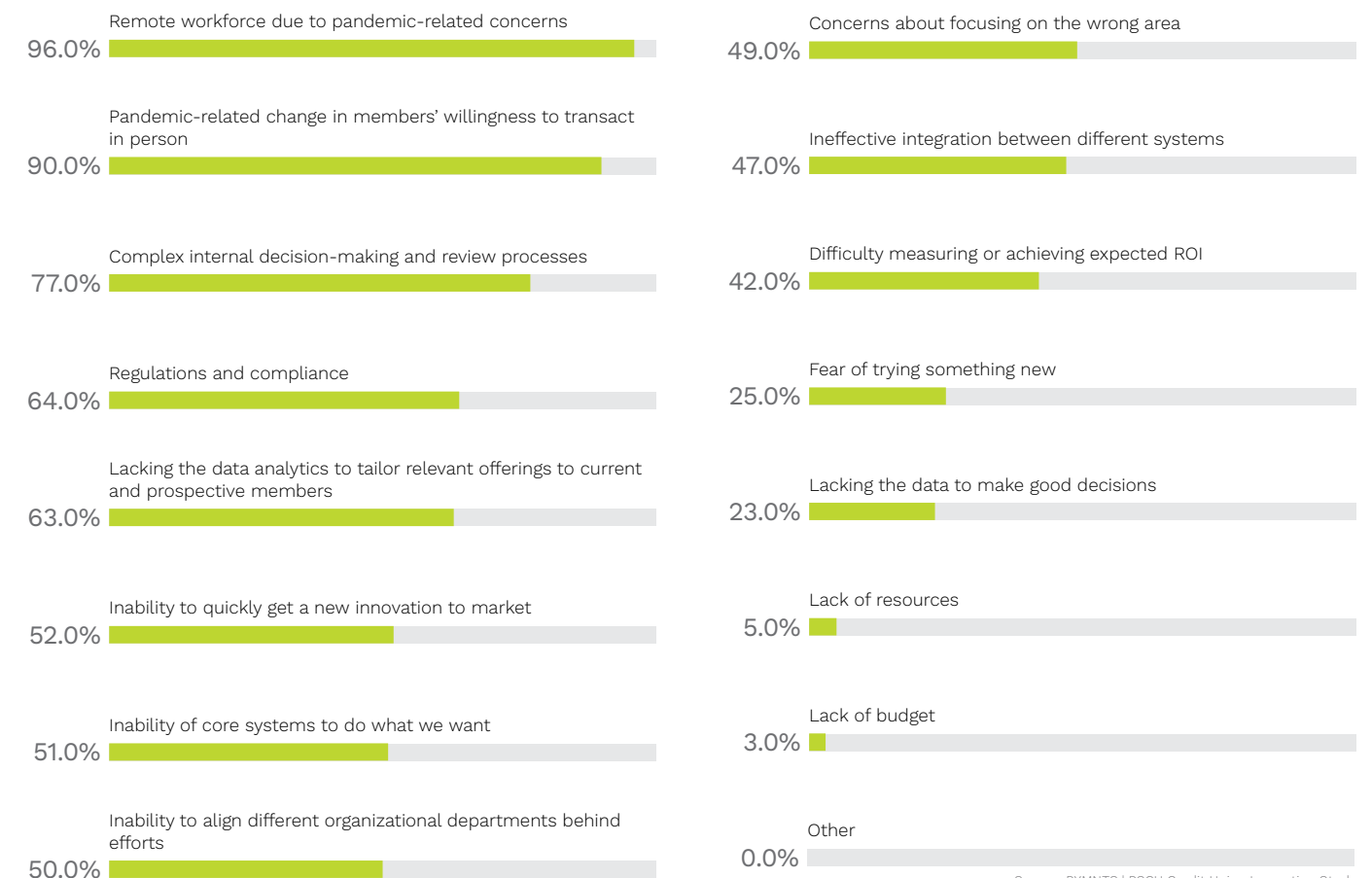
Credit unions have made progress on offering members the innovations they want faster than ever, but that success has not come without challenges. Many are still struggling to improve upon lingering inefficiencies that could hold them back in the long run. Nearly all CUs are still grappling with the operational changes they had to make to cope with the pandemic, for example. Ninety-six percent say that remote workforces are holding them back from innovating, and 90 percent say that the shift away from in-person transactions is making it difficult to unveil new products and services.

These and other market changes wrought by the pandemic have undeniably reshaped the banking ecosystem in the U.S., and credit unions and other FIs have had to make sweeping changes to adapt, but there is one key fallacy in seeing these changes as innovation road-blocks: Members want their CUs to change. Consumers no longer see in-person banking as

Figure 5:

Challenges that CUs face when bringing innovations to market

Share citing select factors as hindrances to their innovation efforts



Source: PYMNTS | PSCU Credit Union Innovation Study

essential. CUs that do not provide them a way to bank and transact remotely are failing to meet their members’ expectations. It is therefore critical that credit unions regard their members’ desires for more digital banking options not as a hindrance but as a fundamental service that they need to deliver. Credit unions ultimately have no control over where or how their members choose to bank, after all.

CUs luckily have control over other factors that are slowing their innovation efforts. Seventy-seven percent of CUs say their own internal review and decision-making processes are so complex they complicate CUs’ ability to bring new products and services to market as quickly as they must, and 64 percent say that meeting regulatory and compliance requirements is a point of friction for them. Tackling these innovation barriers by simplifying and streamlining internal review and regulatory and compliance processes may not be easy, but doing so is certainly easier than trying to reshape members’ fundamental expectations of what their CUs should provide.

The third-most common type of roadblock that CUs face is a lack of technological resources. They arguably have the most

control over this factor, making it the easiest to overcome, and addressing it can help enable the streamlining of other inefficiencies. Sixty-three percent of CUs say they lack the data analytics they need to provide personalized products for their members, and 51 percent say their core systems do not allow them to implement the innovations they want. Acquiring the data analytics capabilities and improving upon their core systems’ limitations can help CUs implement the digital technologies needed to simplify their internal review processes, efficiently manage regulatory and compliance requirements and meet members’ increasingly digital-first banking needs.

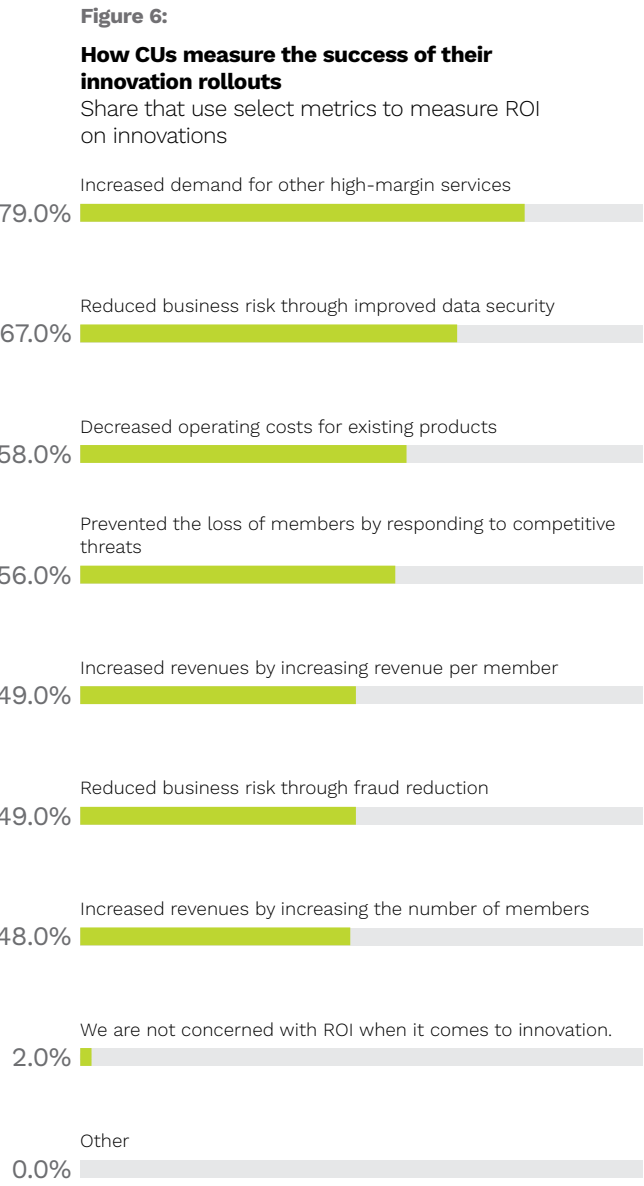
Such improvements are necessary not only because they are needed to improve credit unions’ innovation processes but also because they can help boost CUs’ financial stability. Credit unions are looking to innovate in no small part because doing so can boost their own bottom lines. Failing to implement the innovations they need therefore has a very real financial impact.

The vast majority of credit unions understand this, judging by the metrics they use to evaluate their innovations’ suc-

cesses. Seventy-nine percent of CUs consider new innovations successful if they increase members’ demands for higher-margin services, for example, and 49 percent consider innovations successful if they increase the revenue generated per member. We also found that 48 percent and 56 percent of CUs measure

innovations’ ROI based on whether they increase their revenues by attracting new members or retain members by responding to competitive threats, respectively. In total, 98 percent of all credit unions use one of these four metrics to determine whether new innovations are helping them successfully serve their members and build their broader communities, showing that revenue tops their list of innovation-related priorities.

Cost reduction is also a key metric that CUs use to judge whether new innovations are successful. Sixty-seven percent of credit unions consider innovations successful if they reduce their business risk by improving their data security, and 58 percent consider them successful if they decrease the operating costs of existing products. A grand total of 89 percent of CUs use these or other, similar cost-related metrics to measure the ROI they gain from new products and services. This shows that most CUs believe that innovation is not only a matter of meeting members’ needs and improving their services; it is also a financial imperative.





CONCLUSION

The U.S. banking ecosystem has changed, and credit unions are prioritizing innovation to help them stay on top of members' rapidly evolving financial needs. Members recognize and appreciate the improvements that CUs have made to their innovation processes, growing more satisfied with their CUs and less interested in switching FIs than they have been in years. Credit unions must maintain this pace of innovation if they hope to continue keeping their members satisfied in the long run. This means investing in the core systems and other technological capabilities they need to innovate quickly and efficiently going forward. Doing so will help future-proof their organizations and give them the competitive edge they need to thrive in this increasingly digital-first market.

METHODOLOGY

The Credit Union Innovation Study, a PYMNTS and PSCU collaboration, draws from a three-tiered survey of 5,239 U.S. consumers, 100 credit union decision-makers and 50 FinTech executives conducted between April 26 and May 24, 2021. Respondents for our U.S. consumer survey were census balanced. Respondents' average age was 47 years old. Thirty-two percent had college degrees, 52 percent were female and 36 percent earned more than \$100,000 in annual income.

ABOUT

DISCLAIMER ■

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