BETTER BUYER™

2026

Caring Banks & Credit Unions Study

The Authenticity Deficit: Consumers Crave Human Connection in a Digital World

1,100+
U.S. consumers surveyed nationally

±3%
Margin of error at 95% confidence level

35%
Would switch banks/CUs for community involvement

BETTER BUYER™ | NATIONAL CONSUMER STUDY
By Matthew Scroggs

Madison Albury
Senior Research Editor

Read the full study + award honorees →

KEY TAKEAWAYS — Banks and credit unions are racing to automate everything, but Better Buyer's 2026 Caring Banks & Credit Unions Study reveals what Americans actually want: convenience for the easy stuff, and real people for everything else.

The tension is real. Consumers expect digital tools to work flawlessly for routine tasks. But loyalty? That comes from fair pricing, fast problem resolution, and honest communication. And despite the industry's AI push, trust in artificial intelligence remains remarkably low. Many consumers find "care" closer to home, as 35% of consumers cited community involvement and local sponsorships as a top factor that would persuade them to switch banks or credit unions (CUs).

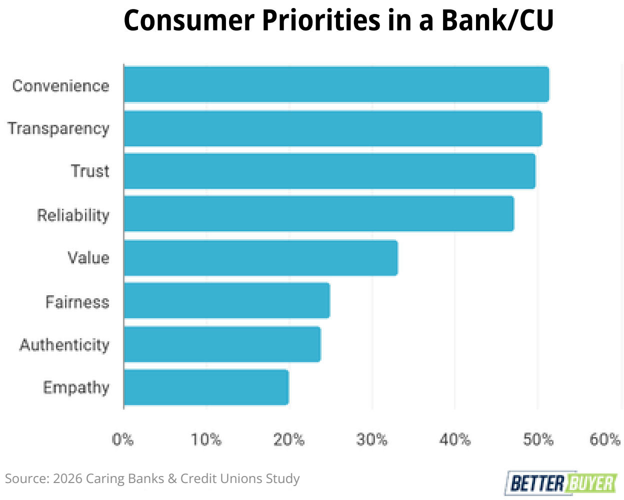
QUICK BACKGROUND

The Better Buyer 2026 Caring Banks & Credit Unions Study measures something that can't be automated: emotional intelligence in commerce. This year's study asked a nationally representative sample of more than 1,100 U.S. consumers what makes a financial institution feel "caring." With a ±3% margin of error at a 95% confidence level, the results are statistically sound and culturally revealing.

The portrait that emerges is of consumers who are tired of corporate scripts and suspicious of bots. As banks and CUs pour money into new technology, the data suggests they're missing something more fundamental: their own humanity.

WHAT "CARING" ACTUALLY MEANS: IT'S COMPLICATED

When choosing a bank or CU, consumers prioritize a specific blend of efficiency and ethics. Convenience first—the majority cite easy access and minimal effort as a top priority. Transparency about fees and policies (50%), Trust (50%), and Reliability (47%) matter to roughly half of all respondents, far above softer measures like Fairness (25%) or Empathy (20%).



But open-ended responses tell a richer story. People want access to a real person, particularly when something goes wrong. Authenticity—defined in the survey as "genuine interaction, not scripted or fake"—was flagged by 24% as a key decision factor, yet surfaced repeatedly in verbatims:

- ***"Being able to conduct business with a real person"***
- ***"Being able to speak with a human being when I have a problem"***
- ***"Human interaction when calling customer service"***
- ***"Live agents available when wanted"***

THE AI TRUST GAP: SHOW ME A HUMAN

The study measured consumer attitudes toward AI-generated search results (like ChatGPT or Google AI summaries) compared to traditional search methods. The resistance is striking.

Only 6% of consumers trust AI summaries "much more" than standard search when looking for a new bank or CU. Meanwhile, 38% trust AI "somewhat less" or "much less." When asked where banks and CUs should invest marketing dollars, "Improving AI search visibility" ranked near the bottom at just 16%.

What does work? Better financial incentives (54%) and community involvement (35%) are the top factors that would persuade someone to switch banks or CUs. Brand advertising comes up short.

6%
trust AI summaries
MORE than search

38%
trust AI
LESS than search

"AUTHENTICITY" OFTEN MEANS "NOT A ROBOT"

Here's the irony: while consumers rely on digital tools for speed, they define "authenticity" largely by what it isn't. In open-ended responses, people repeatedly described authenticity as having "Real people (not computers or robots)" and offering the ability to "Talk to a person not a robot."

Automation is accepted for transactions. But when support is needed, bots feel like obstacles.

THE AGE GAP IN CONVENIENCE

The conventional wisdom about digital natives gets challenged here. Older consumers—supposedly less tech-savvy—are actually the most demanding about ease of access.

60% of respondents aged 45-60, and 60% of those over 60, listed convenience as a top attribute. Among 18-29 year-olds? Only 45%.

For older demographics, a "caring" bank or CU respects their time by functioning smoothly. Younger consumers appear to weigh a broader set of considerations, including values and social media presence.

Josiah Flex
Senior Analyst

OTHER FINDINGS

Several additional insights emerged from the data:

DISCOVERY IS ANALOG

Despite living in a digital world, 60% of consumers would use recommendations from friends or family to find a new bank or CU. Only 16% would turn to AI search results.

PROFESSIONALISM WINS ONLINE

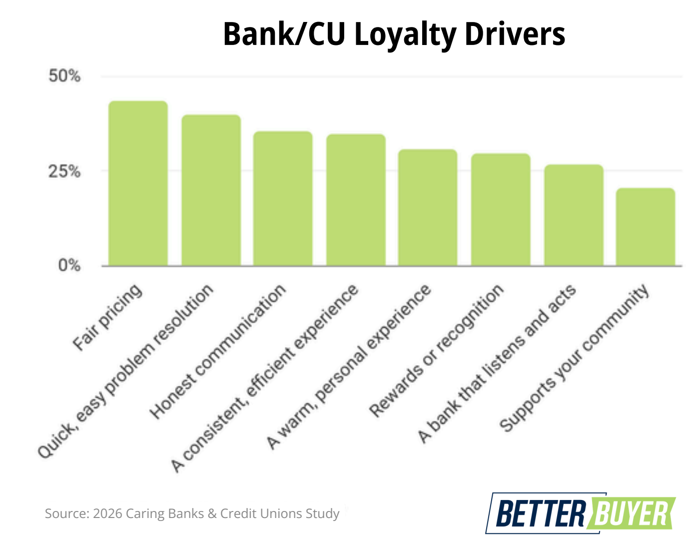
When engaging with banks or CUs digitally, consumers prefer a tone that is "Professional and informative" (35%) or "Friendly and conversational" (20%). The third preference was "Sincere and thoughtful" (18%).

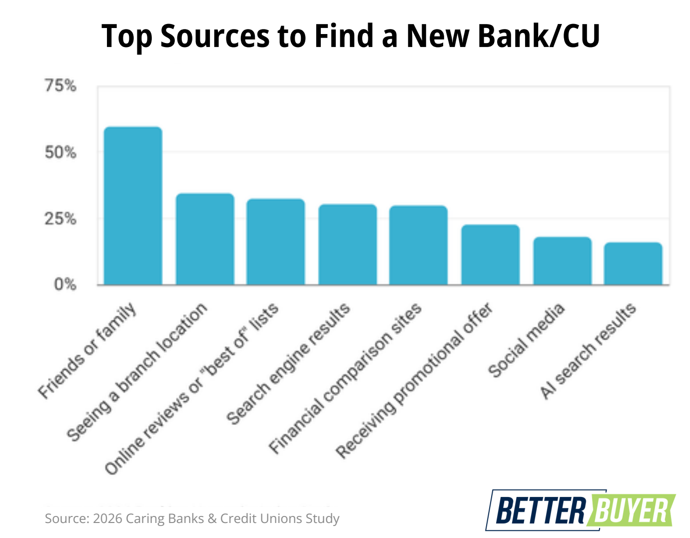
AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

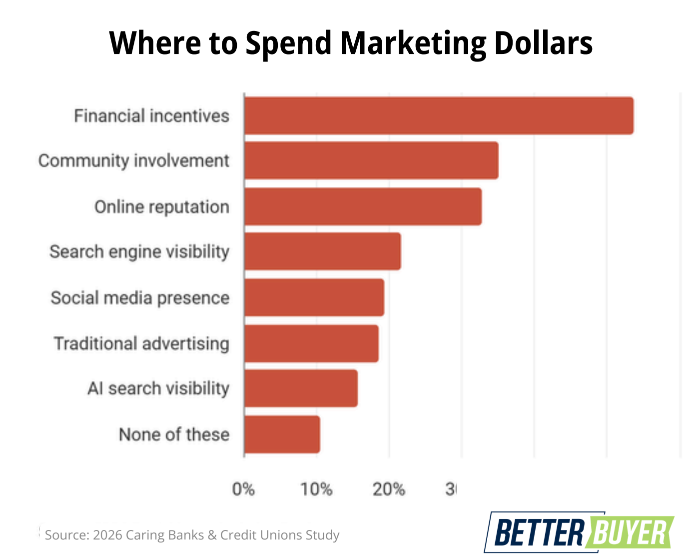
A combined 51% rated it "Extremely" or "Very" important that a bank's/CU's online presence feels authentic rather than corporate or scripted.

THE COST OF "CARING"

While 41% of overall consumers refuse to pay more for services, higher-income earners (>$125k) are significantly less price-sensitive—only 20.5% refused to pay more. Unlike the general population, these high-earners specifically prioritized "Honest communication" and "A bank that listens" as the top services worth a premium.







Jessica Goodrum
Content Marketing Director

Award Categories:
National · Super Regional · Regional · Local

THE COMMUNITY PREMIUM

While national giants compete on digital features, many consumers find "caring" closer to home. In the study, 14.5% of respondents, rather than naming major national brands, wrote in local credit unions and community banks—a category that collectively outranked every individual national institution identified in the survey. This preference is deeply tied to values; 35% of consumers cited community involvement and local sponsorships as a top factor that would persuade them to switch banks or CUs.

This "care" connection is reinforced by a physical presence. Despite the industry's push for total automation, 34% of respondents still discover new banks and CUs simply by seeing a branch location in their daily routine. For a large segment of the population, the human touch isn't found in a chatbot, but in its physical visibility and its investment in the local neighborhood.

Watch: Key Findings from the 2026 Caring Banks & Credit Unions Study

Click to view the animated study breakdown at betterbuyer.com

LOCAL > NATIONAL

14.5%
bypassed all major brands to write in a local bank or CU

35%
community involvement = top reason to switch

34%
discover by seeing a branch in daily routine

FINAL THOUGHTS

Technology should enable human connection, not replace it. That's the message from this study. Consumers will be loyal, but only under specific conditions: fair pricing, transparent policies, and access to real people when problems arise.

There's a boundary to this demand for caring, though. 41% of consumers explicitly stated they would not pay higher fees for any bank or CU services, even those delivering a warmer, more personal experience.

The challenge for 2026 and beyond isn't to offer the human touch as a premium feature. It's to make it the baseline.

> ***"Technology should enable human connection, not replace it."***
> — Caring Banks & Credit Unions Study | Better Buyer

CARING BRAND AWARD

The Caring Brand Award honors companies named by consumers, unaided, in our national study as the brands they believe care most about their customers. Honorees must meet a minimum mention threshold (see awards methodology online).

NATIONAL

- Ally Bank
- American Express
- Bank of America
- Capital One
- Citibank
- JPMorgan Chase
- Navy Federal Credit Union
- PNC Bank
- Truist
- U.S. Bank
- USAA
- Wells Fargo

SUPER REGIONAL

- Citizens Bank — Northeast
- Regions Bank — Southeast
- TD Bank — Northeast

**Only companies identified by consumers in the study can be named honorees.*

A mark of excellence, backed by the voices of real consumers.

View the full award list and learn more about each honoree at betterbuyer.com

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted by Better Buyer using a national survey of 1,105 U.S. consumers. The margin of error is ±3% at a 95% confidence level. To ensure data integrity and eliminate order bias, all answer choices were randomized. The demographic breakdown includes approximately 57% female and 43% male respondents, with age groups spanning from 18 to over 60, encompassing diverse income levels and geographic regions across the United States.

PROMOTIONAL USE

Our awards are derived from independent consumer perception research conducted through nationally representative surveys. Companies named in this study may reference their recognition in editorial or news contexts. However, using the designation name, title, badge, or logo in advertising, marketing, or sales materials requires prior written authorization and an active licensing agreement.

Helping buyers make better decisions.

Backed by real consumer feedback, our ratings, reviews, studies, and videos help people make better purchasing decisions while equipping businesses with practical insights that guide improvements across the customer experience.

Watch Now

Every day we strive to be...

1 Your guide to smarter buying.

We share insights from real customers to help you make more confident decisions.

2 Trusted research for better choices.

We help you compare companies based on the experiences of real people like you.

3 Insight that helps brands improve.

We uncover what customers value most—helping businesses focus and improve.

ABOUT OUR STUDIES

Better Buyer's caring brand studies measure the "emotional intelligence" of commerce.

Rather than tracking basic customer satisfaction, our studies measure six core relational dimensions:

- Empathy
- Transparency
- Fairness
- Authenticity
- Trust
- Reliability

By quantifying these attributes, our studies identify which brands have moved beyond simple transactions to build genuine connections that drive long-term loyalty and advocacy.

MATTHEW SCROGGS

Drawing on more than a decade of experience at one of the world's most respected market research firms, Matt witnessed the immense value of authoritative consumer data. He saw how global, iconic brands used structured research to measure satisfaction, refine their customer experiences, and dominate their markets. But he also noticed a gap. It isn't just the Fortune 500 that need to know exactly where they stand with their customers—businesses of every size deserve that insight.

Today, as CEO of RivalMind (publisher of Better Buyer), Matt makes this standard of survey research accessible to the entire market—studying consumer opinions at scale to reveal what real people actually think. For the consumer, Better Buyer acts as a guide to smarter buying. For the business leader, it serves as the ultimate reality check—equipping brands with practical insights to drive improvements across the customer experience.