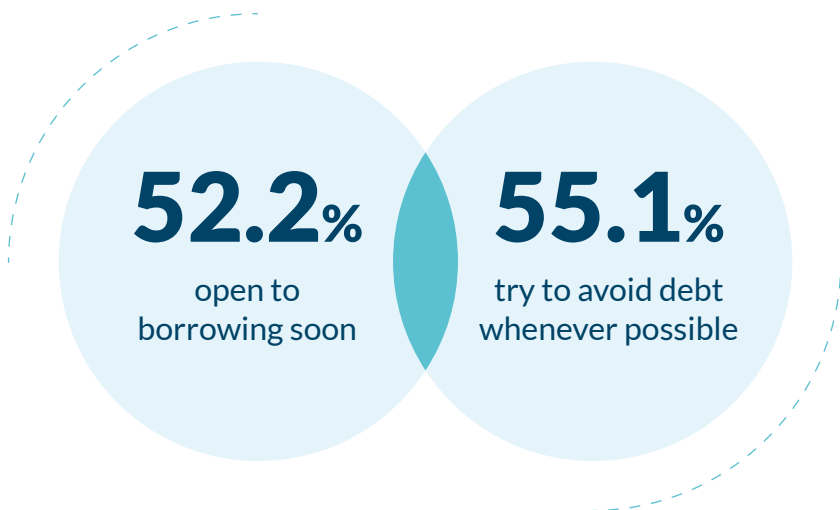


# The 2026 Borrower Outlook

What Lenders  
Need to Know



# Willing to Borrow. Wary of Debt.



Americans aren't done borrowing, but they're not exactly excited about it either. More than half of consumers (52.2%) say they're open to taking out a loan in the near future, yet 55.1% admit they try to avoid debt whenever they can. That tension sits at the heart of today's lending market: real demand and real reluctance.

What tips the scale? Price, mostly. When asked what would actually persuade them to go ahead with a loan, 39.8% of those surveyed point to a lower interest rate and 32.9% to a lower monthly payment. Speed and convenience barely register by comparison at just 19.6% combined.

Trust is in the mix too, but that trust is so thin that nearly half of borrowers (47.3%) shop three or more lenders before committing to one. And when it comes time to actually apply, 44.5% want a mostly digital experience, as long as a real person is still reachable if something doesn't add up.

This survey demonstrates that lenders who win right now are the ones who show up with a genuinely competitive rate, explain it in plain English, and don't make the borrower choose between an app and a human.

## Key findings at a glance

**39.8%**

say a lower rate would move them to borrow

**47.3%**

shop 3+ lenders before committing

**44.5%**

prefer digital with human backup

**32.9%**

would be persuaded by a lower monthly payment

**And that's good news, not a warning label.**

This is a market with a clear playbook. Borrowers aren't impossible to reach or impossible to please. They're telling lenders exactly what it takes to earn their business.

The lenders that listen have a real opening.

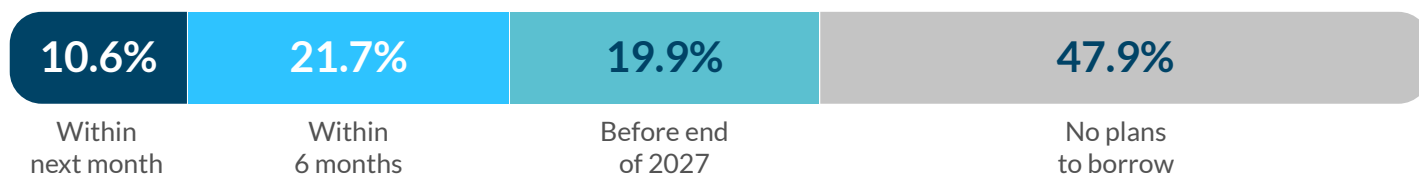
Survey conducted via Pollfish on August 27, 2026 among the U.S. general population ages 18-64.

# There's a loan market. It isn't rushing to borrow.

The demand is real, but it's split down the middle. About 10.6% of people say they could take out a loan within the next month, 21.7% within six months, and another 19.9% sometime before the end of 2027. Still, the single biggest group (47.9%) says they have no plans to borrow right now. Today's market is dominated by a meaningful slice of near-term shoppers, and a larger group deciding whether their purchases are worth taking on debt.

## When consumers say they may borrow

Reported response categories. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.



Past borrowing seems to prime people for future borrowing.

More than half of respondents (58.2%) have taken out at least one loan in the past five years; 35.4% took one, 22.8% took two or more.

Zoom out to lifetime borrowing and that climbs to 70.8% having taken at least one loan, with 32.1% having taken two or more.

The pattern is clearest among 25-to-34-year-olds, where 64.6% have borrowed at least once and 32.1% have borrowed multiple times.

Once someone's been through the process, they're less apprehensive about it. Familiarity seems to lower the wall to re-entry.

### 58.2%

Have taken at least one loan in the past five years

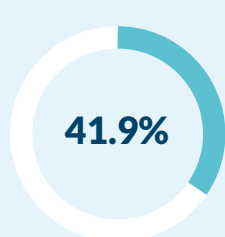
### 70.8%

Have taken at least one loan in their lifetime

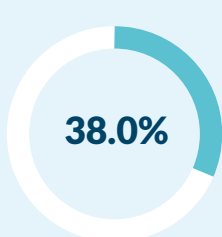
# Borrowing intent shifts with life stage.

**Age tells the real story here.** The 25-to-34 crowd is the most active group in the market. 16.4% are considering a loan within a month and 25.5% within six months, putting 41.9% in active consideration over the next half-year. The 35-to-44 group isn't far behind at 38.0%. Compare that to 55-to-64 year-olds, where only 21.0% are considering a loan in the next six months and nearly 60% say they have no plans at all. The 18-to-24 group is its own story — they post the highest urgency of any age bracket (17.3% considering a loan within a month) but their overall market size is capped by a strong preference to avoid debt altogether.

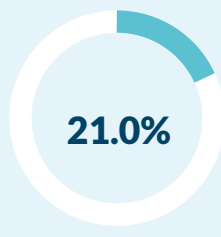
## Considering a loan in the next six months



25-34 years



35-44 years



55-64 years



18-24 show the highest urgency:

**17.3%**

are considering a loan within a month

But don't mistake openness for enthusiasm. Even with 52.2% open to borrowing on some timeline, 55.1% say they actively try to avoid debt.

The hesitation is economical, not emotional: 41.9% blame inflation and the rising cost of living, and 40.1% say interest rates are simply too high right now.

**Debt aversion isn't a niche attitude — it's the majority position.** Just 27.5% of people say they're genuinely comfortable using debt as a financial tool when the terms make sense.

Another 13.3% will still borrow, but say they're far more cautious than they used to be. Most borrowers today aren't reaching for credit — they're driven by circumstance.

# Practical needs. Real financial pressure.

## Why People Borrow



**When people do borrow, it's usually out of necessity rather than luxury.** Buying a vehicle is the number one reason overall, at 24.3% — well ahead of buying a home (10.9%), covering an emergency expense (12.7%), or consolidating debt (8.4%).

That vehicle need spikes to 33.0% among parents with kids under 18, and to 29.7% among 35-to-44 year-olds. Home buying peaks among 25-to-34-year-olds at 18.6%, tracking with the usual life-stage milestones. This is need-based borrowing, not discretionary spending.

### Pressures shaping borrowing decisions



The pressure shaping these decisions is the same pressure showing up everywhere else in people's finances: inflation (41.9%), high rates (40.1%), fear of taking on more debt (35.7%), and general financial stress (33.7%). Younger adults (18-24) feel it hardest — 20.7% cite financial stress directly, even though 65.3% of that same group says they try to avoid debt. Parents with kids under 18 are squeezed from both directions: strong need (that vehicle demand) and strong cost pressure (20.6% cite inflation, 19.7% cite high rates). The upshot for lenders: the opportunity is real, but it only converts when a genuine need lines up with an offer that feels safe to take.

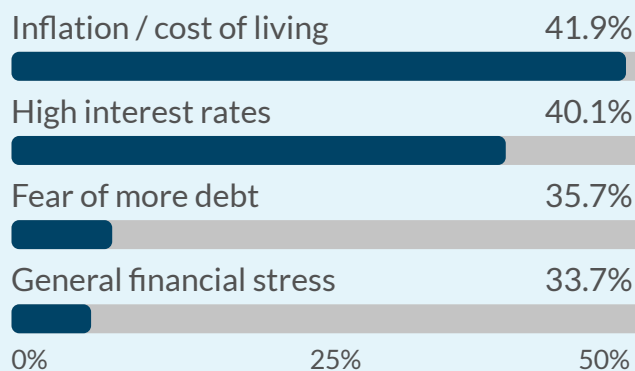
**The upside here is obvious.** More than half the market is open to borrowing, and a repeat-borrower base already understands the process and knows their tolerance for debt. The lenders who meet these borrowers with the right offer at the right moment have a greater potential for conversion than they might expect.

# Rate wins the argument.

## The same priority, asked two ways.

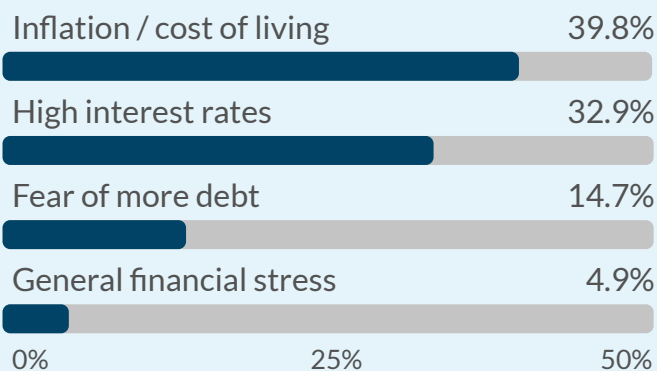
### Evaluating a loan

What matters most



### Applying today

Selected application triggers



If there's one thing this data makes unambiguous, it's that price comes first. Asked what matters most when sizing up a loan, 47.8% said the best interest rate, and 38.6% said the lowest monthly payment. Speed and convenience? Just 7.6%. Flexible terms? 6.0%. Ask what would actually push someone to move forward today, and the hierarchy holds: 39.8% say a lower rate, 32.9% say a lower payment, with faster approval (14.7%) and an easier application (4.9%) trailing well behind.

When asked to describe their needs, most people mention, "process." In open-ended responses, 32.1% mentioned wanting a simpler, faster application, and 15.2% highlighted lower rates and payments.

There were also recurring mentions of flexible repayment, easier approval, and honest terms.

When borrowers are forced to pick one lever, price wins.

However, in their own language, they're asking for both affordability and a process that doesn't feel like a chore.

**Rate sensitivity climbs with age.** Among 55-to-64-year-olds, 47.8% say a lower rate would most affect their decision. That's nearly double the 29.6% among 18-to-24-year-olds.

Younger borrowers lean more on process: 24.5% of 18-to-24-year-olds cite faster approval, versus just 6.1% of the 55-64 group.

### Price still comes first

No age group ranks convenience above price.



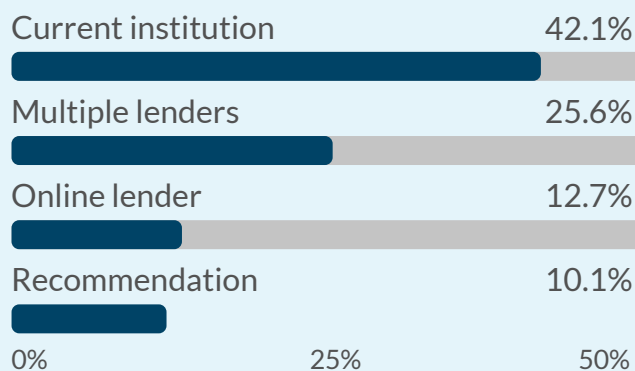
# Trust opens the door.

## Borrowers still shop around.

**Trust decides where people start shopping, even if price determines their final decision.** Asked where they'd look first for a loan, 42.1% said their current financial institution (the single biggest answer) while 25.6% said they'd compare multiple lenders right out of the gate. Online lenders (12.7%) and word-of-mouth recommendations (10.1%) trail behind. Existing relationships still matter, but they no longer guarantee loyalty: one in four borrowers starts comparing options before ever engaging with their own bank.

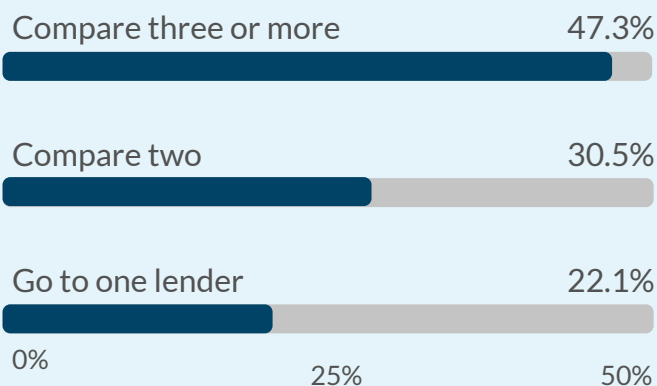
### Where shopping starts

Selected starting points

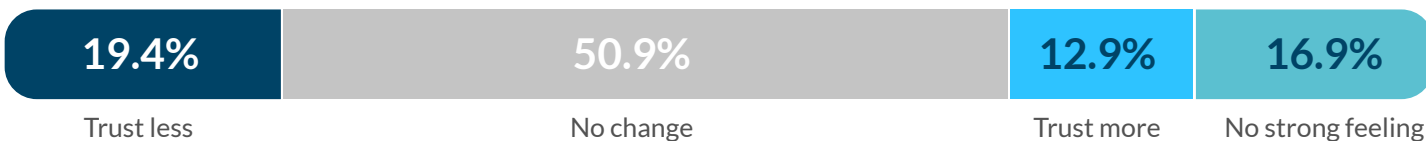


### How many lenders?

Comparison intensity



### Trust in financial institutions over the past year



Once they start shopping, borrowers are thorough. Nearly half (47.3%) compare three or more lenders. Another 30.5% compare two. Only 22.1% go straight to a single lender with no comparison at all.

**Why the heavy shopping?** A slim majority (50.9%) say their trust in financial institutions hasn't changed over the past year. But 19.4% say they trust institutions less than they did, against just 12.9% who trust them more. Another 16.9% don't feel strongly either way. It seems to be a market where loyalty hasn't collapsed, but it also hasn't earned the benefit of the doubt. That's why people are comparison shopping even when they're still happy with their current lender.

# The first interaction can decide what comes next.

# 96.9%

Say their first interaction with a lender matters

## 61.2% + 35.7%

Very important

Somewhat important



**That makes the first interaction critical.** A full 61.2% say that first touchpoint with a lender is “very important” in deciding whether they move forward, and another 35.7% call it “somewhat important.”

Only 3.1% say it doesn’t matter. That holds true across age and gender (there’s no demographic exception to this rule). Your initial procedures with new clients can make or break their decision to borrow from you.

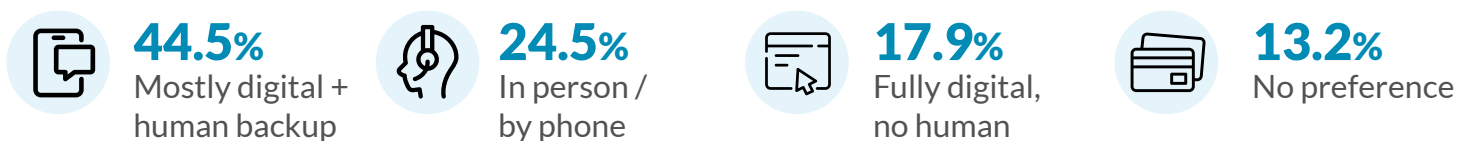
When it comes to actually choosing a lender, rate and terms still dominate (46.5%). Reputation and trustworthiness come in second at 24.6%, just ahead of staying with an existing institution out of habit (13.6%) or chasing speed (15.3%).

It’s worth noting that 31.2% of respondents say they simply don’t have an immediate need for a loan, a reminder that not every obstacle in this market is competitive. Some of it is just timing.

**That’s actually an advantage for lenders willing to invest in the moment.** Trust may be shallow across the board, but it’s also unclaimed. 42.1% already default to their current institution, and the entire market says the first interaction is what seals the decision either way. That’s a huge opportunity for a lender who wants to win new business.

# Digital by default. Human when it matters.

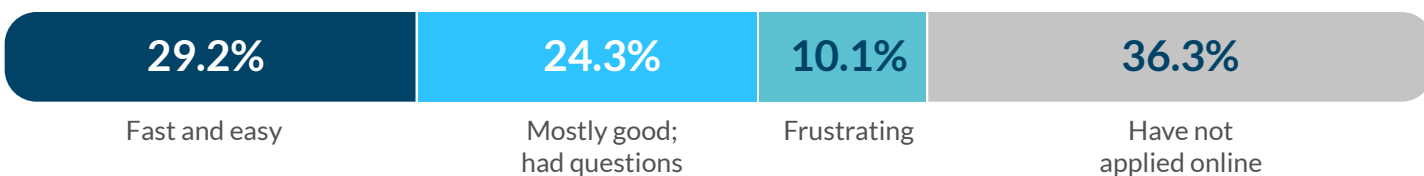
## Preferred application experience



The application experience borrowers want isn't digital-only. 44.5% prefer a mostly digital application with easy access to a real person if questions come up. Only 17.9% want a fully digital, no-human process, while 24.5% still prefer working with someone directly, in person or by phone.

That middle-ground preference is the design brief for the entire industry right now. Fully automated service appeals to a real but modest slice of the market. Fully human-assisted lending still has staying power. The best solution is squarely hybrid: make digital effortless, keep a person one click away.

## Reported online application experiences



Reported online application experiences over the past two years show where support can help. 29.2% call their experience fast and easy. Another 24.3% say it was mostly good, but they were left with questions they couldn't easily get answered. Only 10.1% call it outright frustrating and say they'd have preferred a human from the start. (36.3% simply haven't applied online in the last two years.) Together, the two positive response categories account for 53.5%. That quarter of borrowers left with unanswered questions is exactly the gap human support is designed to fill.

*Percentages are reproduced as reported. Totals may vary slightly due to rounding.*

# Different ages.

## A shared need for reassurance.

### Channel preference / Selected age groups

#### 18-24 years

**23.5%**

Prefer a fully digital experience

**18.6%**

Prefer direct human support

#### 55-64 years

**12.7%**

Prefer a fully digital experience

**30.9%**

Prefer direct human support

**Comfort with digital borrowing tracks closely with age — but the gap isn't as wide as you'd think.** Among 25-to-34-year-olds, 36.5% call their online experience fast and easy, and only 21.2% have skipped online applications altogether in the last two years. The 35-44 group looks similar (32.1% smooth experience, 25.6% non-use). Non-use climbs sharply after that, with 45.2% among 45-to-54-year-olds, 50.9% among 55-to-64-year-olds.

That said, even older borrowers aren't rejecting digital completely. Among 55-to-64-year-olds, 42.0% still prefer a mostly digital process with human backup. That's more than the 30.9% who want in-person or phone support, and far more than the 12.7% who want fully digital. The 45-54 group shows the same shape (41.4% hybrid, 26.8% human-first, 17.2% fully digital). Older borrowers want reassurance, not a rotary phone.

Age is still the clearest dividing line in channel preference. Fully digital appeal runs from 23.5% among 18-to-24-year-olds down to 12.7% among 55-to-64-year-olds, while preference for direct human support climbs from 18.6% to 30.9% across that same age range. It's less a hard market split and more a sliding scale — self-service skews young, guided service skews older.

**Speed isn't a hidden driver.** Just 15.3% say speed and convenience matter most when picking a lender, and only 7.6% say it matters most when evaluating the loan itself. Rate and terms remain the real currency (46.5% and 47.8%, respectively). Younger borrowers do lean more on speed (20.4% of 18-to-24s and 22.6% of 25-to-34s cite it as their top factor in choosing a lender, versus just 6.1% of 55-to-64s). But even for them, it's a secondary consideration, not the headline. Digital should be framed as transparent and trustworthy, not just fast.

**It's not an either/or investment.** Lenders don't have to pick between going digital and keeping a human touch. The data says one well-built hybrid experience satisfies the vast majority of borrowers across every age group. That means lenders can focus on getting the experience right instead of trying to build different journeys for different generations.

# A clear path to earning business.

The findings reveal a loan market defined by caution, price sensitivity, and a demand for transparency. It's also a market with a clear and winnable path forward. Borrowers are telling lenders exactly what it will take to earn their business. They aren't driven by enthusiasm for credit, but by practical needs and a desire for manageable, predictable terms. Trust in lenders is sufficient to keep consumers in the market, even if it isn't yet strong enough to stop comparison shopping. That means the lender who shows up with the right rate and the right first impression has a genuine opportunity to pull ahead of the competition.

Based on these results, here are three recommendations for lenders looking for growth:

01



## Lead with the number, not the pitch

Rate and payment are still the deciding factor for most borrowers. Hide a competitive rate behind marketing copy and you've already lost the comparison shopper.

02



## Earn trust in plain language.

Trust hasn't collapsed, but it's shallow enough that nearly half of borrowers are comparison shopping anyway. Clear terms and honest communication are what convert a "maybe" into an application.

03



## Build hybrid, not either/or.

Digital should be the default path, but the fastest way to lose a borrower with questions is to make a human impossible to reach. The winning model pairs a smooth app with real backup, and it works for nearly every borrower, at every age.

# Three borrower mindsets. One practical playbook.



## The rate-focused shopper

Knows what they want, is comparing multiple lenders, and will go with whoever makes the math simplest.

# 47.3%

Compare three or more lenders.



## The debt-averse bystander

Open to borrowing in theory, but needs a real trigger (and real reassurance) before they'll act.

# 55.1%

Try to avoid debt whenever possible.



## The stable, trust-anchored borrower

Leans on an existing relationship, but is still watching the door for a better offer.

# 42.1%

Start with their current institution.

All three are reachable with the same playbook: a competitive number, said plainly, backed by a person who can answer the question a borrower doesn't want to ask online.

Illustrative profiles. Supporting percentages are overall survey findings, not measured segment sizes.

## SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The defi SOLUTIONS survey was conducted via the online market research platform Pollfish on August 27, 2026, among the U.S. general population ages 18 to 64, examining borrowing attitudes, lender selection, and loan experience preferences.

## ABOUT DEFI SOLUTIONS

defi SOLUTIONS is a pioneer in end-to-end, SaaS loan originations, servicing, and managed servicing solutions. Our customers include the highest-volume captive auto lenders, banks, credit unions, and finance companies in North America.

We have more than three decades of experience helping lenders reduce time-to-market, streamline operations, and customize lending processes with proven, scalable performance.

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