



Female Founders in Fintech Case Series

PensionBee

PensionBee



Romi Savova
PensionBee Co-Founder

Romi Savova paced the aisle, staring up at the rows of empty seats rising before her. The lecture hall at Saïd Business School would normally seat several hundred students, but on this chilly March afternoon in 2021, it was empty of shuffling feet and murmured voices. She then sat at the central computer by the white boards.

Today's presentation would be on Zoom, and students, professors and interested parties would dial in from all over the globe. When the University had offered a room for the virtual session, she hadn't imagined this large, echoing space, but it created a sense of occasion that would keep her on her toes.

She smiled into the camera, watching the number of attendees jump in bursts as they joined from across the globe. It was a diverse audience, and their level of enthusiasm was already clearly visible. She smiled as her colleague Jasper, the CMO of her company PensionBee, waved at her.

'Hi, hi everyone – welcome!' She smiled at the small tiles on her screen. 'My name's Romi and I founded PensionBee just over six years ago as the first platform which allows you to collate your pension plans into one, carefully selected plan. Today, I want to share a little about the pension ecosystem and what it takes to make a Fintech company like PensionBee a reality. If you only have a limited knowledge of the pension

system you're definitely not alone. Not so long ago I struggled to understand my own pension and found the pension market a confusing mess – this led me to found the company you see today.'

She thought back to where it had all started, when she hadn't even considered life in the UK. Born in Bulgaria, she had grown up in South Africa before moving to the US for university. She had studied International Studies and Economics at Emory, indulging an early interest in international markets. She'd then come to the UK to join Goldman Sachs in 2008. Following a summer placement with the risk team in 2007 in New York, she was offered a full-time position in the same team in London in 2008.

2008 was certainly an interesting time to be a risk analyst with the sudden, global economic downturn sparking wide-spread interest in how dysfunctional national systems were creating country-level risk. Romi explained to the group how her Goldman experience at that time made her realise early in her career that secure financial provision at both an individual and national level was critical to healthy economies.

After a brief description of her career until that point, which she concluded with how she followed her time at Goldman Sachs with an MBA at Harvard and a move back to London to work at Morgan Stanley, Romi stopped for a second and then said to her audience,

'I left MS in 2014 to join Credit Benchmark, a fintech start up in the risk space. It was there, when I had to move my MS pension that I realised the full complexity of the pension world.'

'No one teaches you about personal finance – it's an unfamiliar vocabulary for many of us', she continued. 'It felt like a catch-22 situation, where an individual can struggle through the process of moving and collating their pension, only to end up with a mounting pile of fees.'

She smiled at the stream of comments filling the screen in support of this sentiment. It was clear that the pension landscape was a labyrinth to those not familiar with the finance world and to many who were.

She explained how this lightbulb moment strengthened her resolve to make a difference, prompting her to found PensionBee.

Understanding the market

'How many of you know whether, and how much you're paying into a pension?'

A scattered mixture of answers popped up in the chat – the majority of respondents didn't know the details of their pensions.



Figure 2: Co-Founders Romi Savova and Jonathan Lister Parsons

'When we set up PensionBee in 2014, 62% of people in the UK didn't know how much they were paying into a pension – or whether they were paying into one at all!'

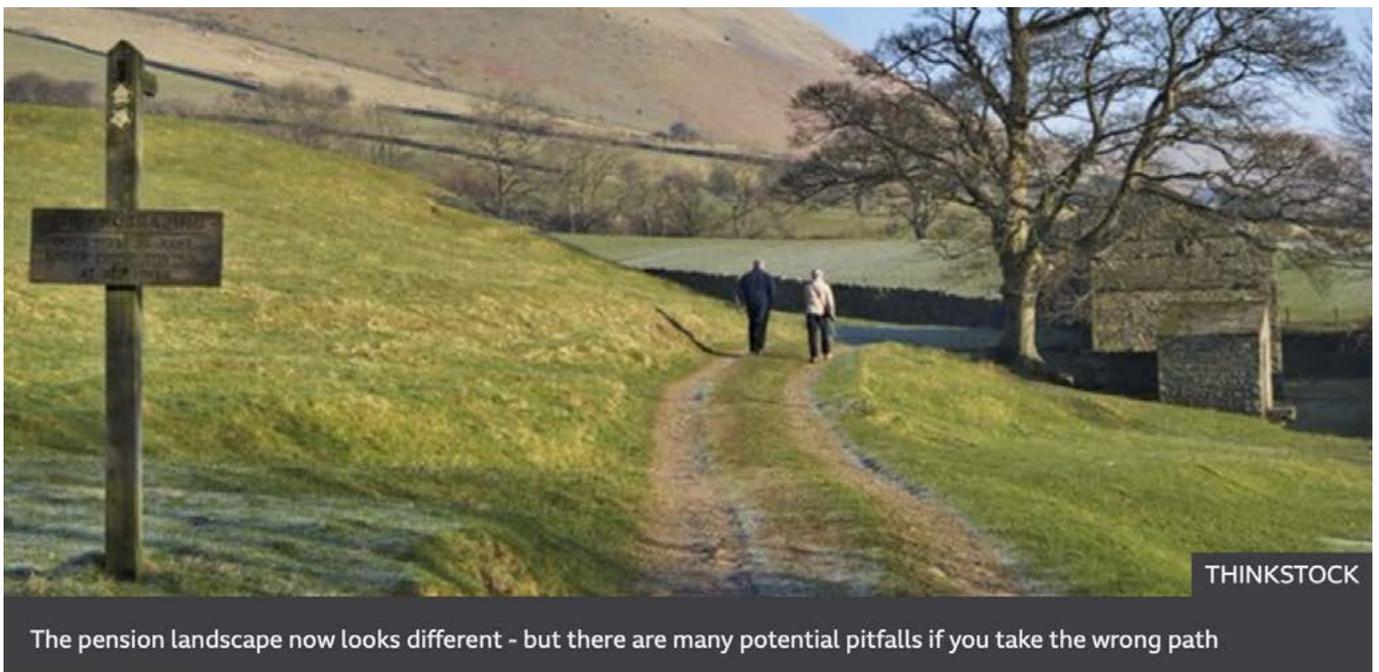
She thought back to when she and Jonathan started PensionBee in Shoreditch in 2014. They had met while attending networking events in Shoreditch at the time and got talking because Jonathan's father had experience in pensions.

The pension market at that time was a major source of confusion for the British public. Studies showed 'a lack of understanding of pensions, leading to low confidence about decision making and high levels of stress'¹, with only 15% of women and 22% of men in the UK saying they fully understood their pensions². It was also shocking among over 30 year olds earning over 10,000 GBP / annum, 48% of women and 40% of men were not saving adequately for retirement³.

Within the wider pension landscape, fund assets had grown an average of 8.1% each year since the 2008 financial crisis. Pension funds remained the main financing vehicle for private pension plans, with \$25.2 trillion of assets under management at the end of 2014, representing 66.8% of the total private pension assets in the OECD⁴.

Despite international growth, the UK's largest employers continued to reduce their pension contributions, from £16.8bn in 2012 to £12.5bn in 2014. There was continued departure from defined benefit schemes (which promised a particular annual income during retirement), with only 3 of the FTSE 100 companies providing any form of defined benefit pension provision as standard to new recruits⁵.

The legislative landscape was similarly opaque. Frequent mandates changed the definitions of differing contribution types and the requirements to swap between these, as well as the age at which pensions could be accessed. The BBC was one of many broadcasters warning consumers that 'changes could mean their income from an annuity will be less than they expect' and that 'without proper advice, the changes could make it easier for people to run out of money before they die' and that the confusion might lead to a 'new wave of fraud'⁶.



The pension landscape now looks different - but there are many potential pitfalls if you take the wrong path

Figure 3: BBC News Coverage from 2015

Despite these public concerns, legacy pension providers failed to prioritise providing the public with the clarity they needed. Romi's early research demonstrated that legacy pension firms took an average of 19 days to respond to an information request, with a maximum time of 40 days. One large firm lost documentation for information requests in 16 separate cases, whilst the average call time to answer a query was found to be 10 minutes – not including the long wait times before the operator actually picked up the phone⁷.

Romi also remembered her surprise at the discriminatory nature of the pension system when she found out that several pension providers requested marriage certificates to verify women's identities, while no such requests were made of male customers. The public were accustomed to an antiquated pension system and were largely disengaged from the potential of what pensions could represent. 'This environment created an early and persisting challenge for PensionBee', Romi explained to her audience.

'How do you drive visibility, excitement and change in an area of finance lacking widespread appeal and public understanding? Compared to fintechs in digital banking, money management or investments, can a pension fintech ever be glamorous enough to entice waves of freshly engaged customers?'

Romi and Jonathan's early conversations with investors and money managers at that time demonstrated market appetite for a technology-driven start-up that could render the pension market accessible while interactions with consumer groups confirmed that they at least had a desire to demystify their individual pensions.

The team worked to iterate towards a minimum viable product, utilising new technology. Romi could not help but feel a rush of emotion remembering those exciting early moments, the rush to make good on the big promises PensionBee was making. 'Whilst determining our strategy for the financial longevity of the company, we were also building technical capability,' Romi explained. 'At the start I was only one side of the team – the financial side. My co-founder Jonathan was the technology guru.'

Romi had understood from an early stage that to form an effective fintech platform the two complementary sides of finance and technology had to successfully integrate, coming together at an operational level as well as acting in concert to form the backbone of the organisation's mission statement. Partnering with Jonathan ensured this integration. There was, however, a fundamental tension to this integration which was apparent from the start.

'Unlike many fintech start-ups, like Stripe or Monzo, that provide their end function immediately, pension plans require long-term financial investment from customers. How do you integrate a financial plan which

lasts 30, 40 years – perhaps more – with the latest technological developments from, say, the last 12 months?' Romi asked her audience.

Her partnership with Jonathan ensured initial integration of finance and technology, but the need to provide long-term financial stability in a product fundamentally different to much of the market remained a tension in ongoing product development.

'We constantly wonder...', Romi told her audience, 'what more can we do, and what should we refrain from doing to effectively balance the finance and technology sides of PensionBee?'

With an MVP in place, the co-founders launched the PensionBee seed fund in 2015, raising an unusually large sum of 1 million GBP. This high level of funding demonstrated wider network confidence in the product, providing Romi and Jonathan with the validation to continue conversations with the largest global asset managers and investors.

Regulation rules

Ensuring that PensionBee fit within the regulatory framework was an early preoccupation for Romi; she had been keen from the start to not only meet regulator expectations, but to work towards solving the particular pain points of the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA).

'It was important to validate whether the regulators would like it,' she explained. 'PensionBee fills the advice gap prevalent in the regulators' thinking. It's a technology which explains the risk of insufficient savings to consumers, and how this risk can be mitigated.'

Lack of confidence in pensions had been a governmental concern for several years ahead of PensionBee's creation. In March 2009 the Department for Work and Pensions had commissioned a paper on 'Trust and Confidence in Pensions', prompted by earlier investigation on attitudes towards pensions which had demonstrated 'relatively low to moderate levels of trust and confidence in government and government pension provision'⁸.

In 2015-2016 the FCA was widely broadcasting its interest in pension reform and regulation, expressing its intention to protect customers through increased pension measures. The Chairman's foreword within the 2015/16 annual FCA report⁹ highlighted the 'major FCA work programme' required to reform pension choices, whilst the CEO reflected upon the 'necessary policy changes' made to 'provide an appropriate framework... to operate the new pension freedoms'¹⁰.

The same report introduced a market study¹¹ to understand and protect consumer pensions and advised the creation of new standards and requirements on firms to 'provide appropriate risk warnings to consumers who have decided how to access and change their pension savings'.



Figure 4: Excerpt from FCA Annual Report 2015-16

The FCA's focus on pensions persisted in 2016 with several changes¹². Romi and her team were painfully aware that their pension service had to be able to respond to the increasing number of changes within an already complicated regulatory landscape, working in line with FCA priorities.

Raising her thumb in front of the camera, Romi started to count: 'This meant

1. Using understandable language that consumers could decipher without being financial experts
2. Providing appropriate information prior to sign up
3. Selecting global asset management products that were designed for pensions and high in liquidity
4. Offering excellent customer service'.

At the same time, making sure that PensionBee applied for regulatory approval in a timely manner was crucial.

In 2016, the Financial Times reported an average of nearly 25 weeks for FCA authorisation, with maximum processing time up to 74 weeks¹³. Romi recalled how unlike many financial startups, PensionBee anticipated FCA timelines, and provided the regulators with an aligned product against timescales suited to the technological developments taking place.

'We expected the FCA to take a long time to grant authorisation because the waiting times were well publicised. That is one of the reasons we raised a large seed fund', she explained.

After pausing for a second, she continued, 'while we waited, we had a fully-fledged product in our private development area, but in the public area we were offering a simple Find My Pension tool to generate interest and engagement in the proposition', as if anticipating a question.

Skipping employers, straight to customers

In terms of timescales, Romi and Jonathan's plan was working out well. The product was built while the FCA approval was being processed so that, by the end of 2015, everything melded together in time for customer trials to begin in 2016.

As the launch date approached and wider brand construction was required, the PensionBee team expanded from just co-founders to include a VP marketing and an operations manager.

'These initial hiring decisions demonstrated our priorities from early on' Romi explained to the audience. She and Jonathan wanted a team that put the 'customer first' with a business model skewed towards 'helping people, rather than just investors'.

In 2016, the PensionBee team also was working to understand the level of engagement necessary with other stakeholder groups. One of these was employers.

As of March 2016, 64% of all workers were members of a workplace pension scheme – a figure which was expected to rise considerably in the future¹⁴. The workplace pension reforms, initiated by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in 2012 with gradual roll-out by 2018, bestowed a duty on all employers to automatically enroll eligible employees into a qualifying pension scheme and to make contributions on their behalf. Minimum contribution levels were introduced in a phased process, with full implementation by 2019¹⁵.

Romi explained how it was soon ‘obvious to everyone’ that employers would seek to meet the minimum requirements but were unlikely to invest time and money in schemes moving beyond this. This wasn’t good news for PensionBee. She explained how she and Jonathan recognised a conflict of interest with employers early on:

‘It just wouldn’t benefit employers to endorse PensionBee if they already had a pension in place – in fact it could undermine their own scheme. So we decided to go straight to the consumer.’

However, the requirement to auto-enroll in the employer’s pension scheme meant that the main line of communication was often viewed as between employers and providers, making customers less connected with pension providers.

‘So who should our customers be?’ Romi posed the question to the group. Defining the right core customer early on was crucial to not only developing but to selling a successful product. Whether to target a large-scale employer project, or to effectively surpass the legislated complications of employer mandated pension plans affected everything from product structure to marketing strategy.

She explained how PensionBee made the early decision to communicate directly with the customer through an online interactive platform, prioritising efficient customer service to offer a product which differed from the cumbersome provision from legacy providers through employer routes.

‘Was this the right decision? What do you think?’ she asked the faces before her, remembering all the challenges her team faced.

Designing a business model with longevity

By mid 2016 the PensionBee product was ready for customer testing; a waiting list of early customers had been built from friends and family, as had early demos and prototypes.

Explaining how the product works, Romi pointed to a flow chart she shared on Zoom and said, ‘Each customer enters data allowing for identification of their divergent pension plans, which can then be consolidated into a single pension plan which the customer chooses according to what best suits their needs. What’s important to us is that they can see how much they have in total and then ideally decide to contribute more so that they can reach their retirement goals.’

As she talked her audience through the general product premise, Romi’s mind drifted back to the early days when PensionBee’s value proposition looked very different.

‘The initial concept included first gathering lots of information about each pension plan from the old provider and providing the customer with all of that information. This way the customer could better understand their current pension distribution and the differing amounts accrued with each plan’, she added.

‘Why might a report summarising pension findings not be appropriate for individual consumers’ needs? What are the core needs that this doesn’t fulfil?, Romi asked the audience.

Seeing a spike of chat responses, she nodded and started to explain how this initial business model could not be the final one for several reasons. First, providers were not used to giving standardised information, which made the content hard to compare. In addition, customers would need to be financial experts to decipher the information given by some providers.

‘They didn’t want to do this lengthy exercise, they just wanted to combine their pensions into one place and not endure any delays. They just wanted to see it online and set up their contributions, right Jasper?’, she asked.

Taking over from Romi, PensionBee CMO Jasper Marten’s voice filled the hall from the speaker.



Figure 5: Jasper Martens, PensionBee Chief Marketing Officer

‘People weren’t looking for this report – they were looking to consolidate, to solve their pain point’, he added, ‘we needed to provide a one-stop-shop, and most importantly, continue the relationship with our customers’.

As Jasper spoke, Romi thought back at that critical point in time when PensionBee started to evolve itself into a service that solved a critical pain point of customers by amalgamating pensions, providing a variety of plans while offering accessibility, easy updates and clarity.

The adaptation provided a more financially viable service, but also one that required greater customer commitment upfront, as all existing pensions had to be transferred into a PensionBee plan before the further analysis on effective plan provision could be carried out.

She remembered how the resultant conversion rate of early PensionBee users from initial report consultation to buy-in of the official pension plans and long-term use of the service had gone from 3% to 25% overnight.

Picking up the baton from Jasper again, she said, 'These changes really helped with conversion rates because the customers that signed up to the newly designed service were substantially more committed to the process. They wanted to consolidate their pensions and there were no lags with unrequested reports. We also made it possible for customers to start contributing immediately – even before their pensions were transferred – and many took on this option!'

Many thumbs up emoticons appeared in the chat box. But also a short question: 'What's next?'

'Great question', Jasper reacted quickly, 'this is one of the biggest challenges for our organisation. How do you remain current and engaging for the next 40 years for the same customer? What future services do you prioritise?'

Building customer trust as a newbie

Building a widely recognised brand with true longevity required evolving to meet new demands and market changes whilst prioritising retention of the core customer base.

'We had to move from the cold to the warm in the early years', Jasper told the group, emphasising the importance of trust. 'Would you trust your savings with a startup? I wouldn't!' He laughed, explaining how the perception of the safety net was as important as the mechanism itself, assuring customers of financial security. Clarity of communication and transparency were crucial to building customer trust¹⁶, and this shaped the technical specifications of the plans they offered.

'How would you do this?' he asked the audience.

'It's interesting', Jasper continued, 'Originally we were giving too much to the customer, turning them off. Say we have seven pension plans on website – if we introduce two more then you need to take two away. Otherwise, people get turned off.' He explained how the face-value names of pension plans also had to be easily understandable to avoid deterring customers.

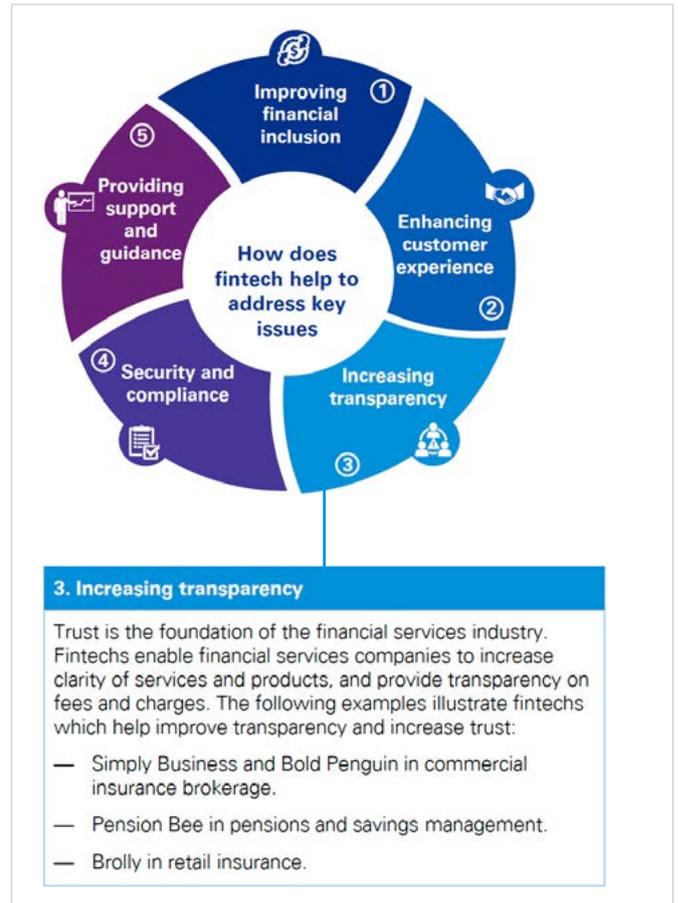


Figure 6: Excerpt from the 2017 KPMG Value of Fintech Report

However, this wasn't enough as PensionBee was still a newbie in a market where track record and customer recognition were considered crucial to success, particularly as the quality of products only became 'apparent at the end of a life-long customer relationship'¹⁷.

To alleviate their liability of newness¹⁸, PensionBee decided to work, at least initially, with large money managers to draw on the experience, size, and credibility of these partners and to add stability to their own brand.

By working with the likes of Blackrock, State Street Global Advisors, Legal & General and HSBC as partners, PensionBee was able to boost customer trust while retaining its nimble, customer focused capabilities.



Figure 7: List of Partners from PensionBee Website (2016)

'Yes' Romi cut in, 'but the risks of these partnerships were as important as the rewards.'

Several audience members were nodding as Romi continued, 'You're reliant on the quality of their asset management and operations and on the product decisions they make. What if they discontinue a product, for example?'

After several minutes brainstorming these various risks together with her audience, Romi took a deep breath and explained how at the end of 2016, the PensionBee focus on customers, transparency and careful partner curation had paid off.

'£20 million assets under administration, a prize for Innovative Business of the Year at the 2016 Startup Awards, and we became one of the Top 10 companies to Watch by the Financial Times!', she beamed as thumbs up icons and positive comments started popping up on her screen.



Figure 8: PensionBee team receiving the Innovative Business of the Year Award at the 2016 Startup Awards

Communicating with the customer

Taking a moment to scan the comments, a particular question caught Romi's attention. She repeated it aloud.

'How did you connect with your customers in the first place?'

'Connection was something we've had to work at', she started to explain.

'Pensions aren't a traditionally appealing product – people would rather be watching Netflix', Jasper interjected.

'He's right', Romi continued, 'financial products have never been the lifeblood of friendly chat, and customers don't usually recommend them to their friends.'

She continued to explain how PensionBee had worked hard to connect with potential customers, using a two-pronged approach: a) an injection of cash into social media promotion in the short term, and b) investment in content creation for both the short and the long-term.

'With the revenue expansion of 2017, we upped the marketing efforts', Romi explained. Facebook campaigns were already generating visible uptake. Working with influencers and financial bloggers also proved effective.

To reach less social-media savvy audiences, however, more needed to be done. She explained how, 'despite the unorthodox nature and cost', they ran targeted billboard campaigns outside of London, e.g., in Brighton and Hove, featuring real customers in an effort to reach the 'less social-media focused demographic'¹⁹. The team also targeted the pension community through sponsorship at events.

'It isn't easy though', Romi continued her answer. 'How do you engage with customers of all different ages and life stages?' The question of maintaining a wide crosscut of age groups was one which continued to challenge PensionBee. When different generations consumed content on almost entirely different platforms, reacting to different techniques and messages, how could a firm engage them simultaneously?

She explained how in line with a business model that focused on life-long support and a direct-to-consumer value proposition, her team viewed informational content as a key element of customer engagement. PensionBee got their research published in the Telegraph, Times and industry-specific titles such as Pensions Age, documenting the failings of legacy providers, discussing everything from outdated customer service to inadequate pension plans.

The website or mobile app served as the focal point, with the PensionBee blog and the 'Pensions Explained Center', built in 2015, designed to keep customers interested by providing clarity on a vast array of pension-related topics, exposing the 'Outrageous Pension Fees'²⁰ of other organisations, and supporting financial planning for long-term goals²¹. Romi explained how by 2020, the blog and Pensions Explained Center accounted for half of all PensionBee website traffic.

'One of the key issues we still face in connecting with our customers though is the silent majority within feedback.' Her brow creased in earnest as she articulated the issue. 'Once you know the customer – and what it is they want as a group – you need to balance the mixture of needs within the customer

group, rather than only listening to the few highly vocal individuals’.

Overall, Romi remembered 2017 as the year when PensionBee was focused on proving the efficacy of its model, building relationships with both the customers and the pension providers, whilst also enhancing the technical functionality of the product.

‘We were fighting on many fronts’, she explained, ‘but we had cases where regulation, technology and customer trust reinforced one another, creating synergies. For instance, regulatory developments over the past few years required us to provide clarity at every stage of the process, which is why we developed the PensionBee Transfer Tracker. But soon, we realised how this tool allowed the customer to clearly understand where their money was within the process and could boost customer trust through transparency.’

In with the new whilst reassuring the old

After a strong 2017 which saw assets growing five-fold to £100 million, 2018 again witnessed strong growth, with assets under administration rising to £350 million. It was the time when product improvements and the advent of new innovations took centre stage.

PensionBee’s responsible investing programmes responded well to market needs, and the implementation of Drawdown, which allowed the release of money from a personal or workplace pension of up to 25% of an individual’s pension tax-free, was met with a surge of participation from the over 55 demographic.

Continual innovation was, however, not without challenges and often required quick reactions to preserve customer confidence. For instance, when PensionBee launched the Legal and General Future World Plan, designed to allow customers to invest in a low carbon future, the plan included investment in Shell, a company accused of consistent greenwashing.

Romi remembered how this prompted numerous customer queries, expressions of outrage, and requests to avoid investment in certain companies. PensionBee’s quickfire response, in turn, had been a public attack on Shell. ‘We wrote an open letter to the money manager²², asking them to justify their investment in Shell, which was widely published by papers, and, in some ways, turned a potential disaster to our advantage’, Romi explained with a smile.

Building on the success of this communication, PensionBee launched a revised version of the low carbon plan that excluded fossil fuel producers.

While continuing to innovate in 2019, PensionBee also made sure they didn’t lose focus on existing customers, double-downing on the importance of the life-long customer journey. Romi explained to the audience that whilst in 2016 and 2017 75% of PensionBee’s organisational effort worked towards attracting new customers, in 2019 the inverse was true, with retention and customer satisfaction prioritised.

‘Pensions have always been a sticky product’, Romi explained to the audience. ‘But whilst customers have historically been unlikely to switch pension providers, this is likely to change, and not every Pension provider achieves our exceptional retention rate of over 95%!’

She considered how innovation and diversification were essential for attracting new customers, whilst retention and trust were crucial to a successful business model. But how could they continue innovating without causing concern amongst existing customers? Was there a limit to the degree of innovation which could be introduced, the degree of change a customer could withstand in a lifetime before moving their pension elsewhere. She raised her eyebrows, considering their innovations to date.

The introduction of three new plans (Shariah, Preserve, and 4Plus) had provided a diversity of investment approaches, suiting different values, risk levels and goals. The introduction of the retirement planner had enabled further clarity in the pension planning. The ‘Refer a Friend’ scheme had driven online marketing channels whilst the adoption of the ‘Simpler Annual Statement’ had allowed for ease of comparison of pension pots with other providers.

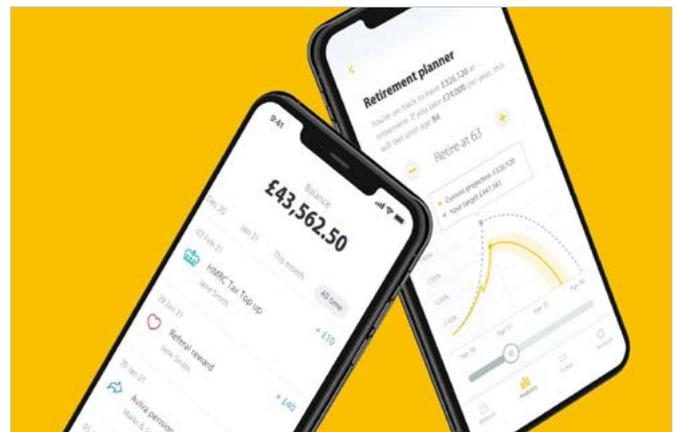


Figure 9: PensionBee Retirement Planner

For new customers, national billboard promotions, television advertising and digital acquisition had been well-received across the country, prompting the active user base to jump from 46,000 at the end of July 2019 to nearly 60,000 in October. This brought the total number of customers signed up since launch to over 210,000 while assets under administration had more than doubled from 2018 to reach £745m at the end of 2019.



Figure 10: The PensionBee Team in 2019

Moving forward, however, customer retention would continue to be a focus for PensionBee. While retention rates were high, Romi explained how her team had identified two key reasons for customer departure, both linked to limited product functionality.

'It's either that customers want to use product extensions that PensionBee has yet to build or they desire a service outside of PensionBee's planned expansion.'

As she focused back on the camera, her face tightened.

'A lot of our customers are growing more interested in investments, but we don't want to overcomplicate our product. So we have to be very careful to design it in a way that allows customers to easily get the information they want and to engage in the financial aspects of their pension as much as they want to.'

'This requires a race against time whilst careful consideration of who we want to be in the future', she explained in a serious tone. 'The broadening of PensionBee's user base comes with hard choices. Do we want to focus on helping customers in their early 30s save for a home, or provide an even better service to those nearing retirement?'

As she left the question hanging, she thought about services like Moneybox and Nutmeg which provided the younger generations with a more targeted range of money management services and felt a twist in her gut. Would they be PensionBee's new competitors, and if so, could PensionBee sustain a place at the forefront of innovation in years to come?

Looking to the future: what comes after a global pandemic?

Romi looked out the windows of the auditorium. The sky was darkening.

The last section of her narrative covered the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, and the continued reactionary state created by a cycle of sudden lockdowns. 'When COVID-19 hit the UK in February 2020 there was a very brief window in which we had to decide on a response strategy', she explained. 'How do you ensure continued success and resilience through a period like that?' It was a question every business had been forced to consider.

In formulating their response Romi and her team had considered the 2008 crash, which had created a period of high buying opportunity for the few, whilst presenting a difficult time for the average saver. Investments had dropped and confidence plummeted. Anticipating a similar reaction, PensionBee decided to prioritise customer service, maintaining constant communication with customers. The phones were kept manned, and the team ensured a response time of under 24 hours.

'At a time of great uncertainty, you have to be committed to reassuring customers', she explained. The paperless system, near-real-time tracking on the app, and interactive dashboards had all facilitated a technological advantage over their competitors. During the pandemic, these innovations became effective communication tools while other decisions made earlier, such as liquid investments, diversification, and



Figure 11: News Excerpt from PensionsAge

using the largest asset managers, also proved to be good ones for this new and difficult period.

The strategic movement of advertising campaigns to later in the year and redirection of marketing channels to providing the information that potential customers – now largely confined at home – needed to consolidate their pensions were critical.

Educating existing customers to consider the long-term investment trajectory of pensions became increasingly important, as one's first experience of turbulence in share prices (such as the extreme drops caused by COVID-19) could cause anxiety and suboptimal investing behaviors.

'Unlike most UK pension providers', Romi explained, 'PensionBee provides a daily balance which, while adaptable, makes effects from the pandemic visible at an earlier stage. We needed to make sure that this didn't cause panic'.

How long this period would last, was another critical question. The fear of an uncertain future with a shifting customer base was very real. She thought about the diversification into other markets and technologies which PensionBee had to postpone for now.

PensionBee had always wanted to go beyond prescribed industry limits and have a real impact in the lives of their widening customer base. It was beginning to have an influence on the flow of investments within the UK, becoming a key player within the financial technology realm.

As an advocate for open banking, PensionBee was also driving the design of pension dashboards, and the wider open banking conversation. The creation of accessible APIs further encouraged integrated, technological change within the new fintech world of pensions. The recent announcement of Starling

Bank integrating PensionBee into their Business Marketplace was certainly a highlight of 2021.

In many issues, such as ESG reporting, certain requirements had become mundane tick boxes for organisations and rarely inspired impact. PensionBee aimed to move beyond the prescriptive there too. The recently launched fossil fuel free pension plan was the first mainstream product of its kind, receiving wide publicity within the industry.

Whilst PensionBee's bold statements and mission were beginning to generate a national

conversation, how could they ensure continued traction in a world increasingly preoccupied with surviving?

The added pressure of expansion raised the question of how to expand beyond the pandemic as well. Should they open a bank account service alongside their pension plans? Or expand to other countries with the same product, tackling the regulatory stumbling blocks which currently acted as deterrents?

'We have a voice, and the ability to create the future that our customers actually want. It's an exciting time' she told the audience, signing off on a high as the questions of PensionBee's future strategic direction whirled around her.

As she packed up her bag and put on her face mask, she kept thinking. There was no doubt this had been a strange year and, looking ahead, the uncertainty was likely to continue. But the way her team handled the pandemic gave her hope in the face of the next set of important decisions they had to take to keep PensionBee on its upward trajectory.

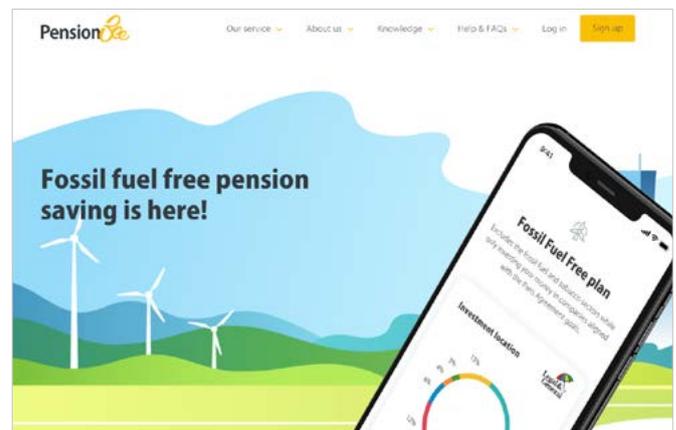


Figure 12: PensionBee Fossil Fuel Free Pension Plan Announcement 2020

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