Investor Insights & Outlook

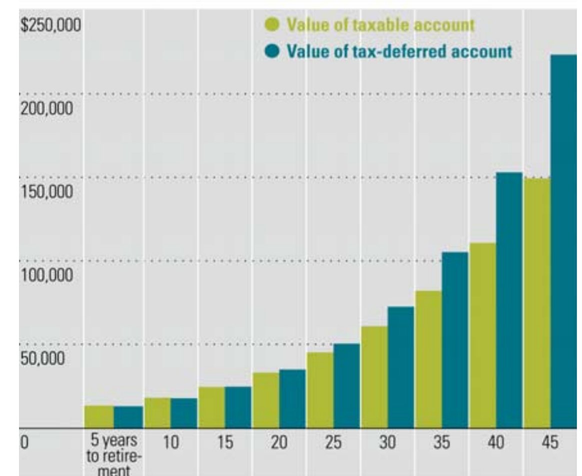
October 2010 | Vol.1 No. 3 | Investment Updates

Take Advantage of Tax-Deferred Accounts

One of the main reasons why retirement accounts are so beneficial is the power of tax deferral. In a tax-deferred investment vehicle such as a 401(k) plan or an IRA, your earnings are not taxed until you begin withdrawing money from your account in retirement. Consider the image. A hypothetical value of $10,000 is invested in both a taxable and a tax-deferred account. The difference in value between the two accounts becomes quite substantial after 20+ years. For investors with a long investment time horizon, a tax-deferred portfolio is an excellent choice.

Please keep in mind that once you begin to withdraw money from your retirement account, you will be taxed accordingly. However, since you will most likely earn less in retirement, withdrawals from a deferred portfolio may be taxed at a lower rate.

Benefits of Deferring Taxes



Withdrawals of tax-deferred accumulations are subject to ordinary income taxes. A 10% federal tax penalty may apply to withdrawals made before age 59½. Returns and principal invested in stocks are not guaranteed.

Source: This hypothetical example is for an investor in the 28% bracket using the 2009 tax code (estimated to become the 31% tax bracket in 2011). $10,000 is invested in stocks at the beginning of year 1 (2010). Assumes an 8% annual total return (6% price return and 2% income return) and a 15% tax rate on capital gains and dividends in year 1 (2010), after which the rates revert to 20% and the investor's marginal tax rate, respectively. The investment is taxed at a 28% marginal tax rate in year 1 (2010), and then reverts to 31%. Taxes are assessed yearly on the taxable account but only at the end of the period on the tax-deferred account. Estimates are not guaranteed.

James D. Hallett, MSFP CFP AIFA
jim@hallettadvisors.us
360-457-6000

Advisor Corner

Hallett & Associates, P.S. is registered as an investment advisor with the SEC and only transacts business in states where it is properly registered or excluded from registration requirements.

Common Investment Mistakes

Almost all of us have made investing mistakes. The key is not to make the same mistake twice. These mistakes can directly affect whether or not you achieve your desired goals. By repeating even just one mistake, individual investors can quickly become their own worst enemy. Below are some common mistakes that many fall prey to and some suggestions on how to sidestep them.

Starting Too Late

The first mistake a large number of investors make is waiting too long to initiate a long-term investment plan. The earlier you can start the investment process, the more likely it is that the plan will succeed. For example, let's consider two investors—Bill and Tim. Bill began investing $5,000 per year 30 years ago. Tim began investing $10,000 per year 20 years ago. Assuming a hypothetical return of 10% per year, Bill's ending wealth value was $822,470 compared to $572,750 for Tim. Thanks to the power of compounding, a small amount of money, wisely invested early on, can turn into a large sum over time. Avoid procrastinating; start investing today.

Lack of Diversification

By investing all of your money into just one asset class, industry, or company, you are placing all of your eggs into one basket—and this can be extremely risky. It is better to combine a variety of investments, such as stocks, bonds, and cash, which are unlikely to move in the same direction. Your risk exposure should be lessened as a result.

Chasing Past Performance

Yesterday's hot stocks or mutual funds may not be today's best investments. A good number of investors purchase assets when they have already reached their peak, only to watch their performance subsequently suffer. It may be a good idea to choose investments with a history of good performance as well as quality management.

Lack of Research

No matter what type of investment you plan to make, be sure to conduct the proper research. It is unwise to allocate your money to an investment you do not understand. There are a number of helpful resources that you can explore—ranging from public information to professional advice. Take advantage of these when possible.

Unrealistic Expectations

Many investments require time to grow. Investors often become frustrated with the early performance of their investments, decide to sell too quickly, and move the proceeds into other investments. This will result in too much trading, which is not only expensive, but also usually unnecessary. It is important to maintain a long-term view and to not be distracted by short-term results.

Overconfidence

Confidence is a good thing, but overconfidence can cause investors to improperly select investments. Too much assurance in one's knowledge and ability can lead investors to focus on the upside and deemphasize the potential downside of investments. Instead, a solid financial plan constructed by a professional can go a long way.

Creating a Budget

Creating a budget may seem like a complicated and unnecessary burden for most people, but a budget can be a valuable tool for managing your money. Instead of thinking about it as just another tedious thing to do, think about how a carefully-constructed budget can help you reduce expenses and optimize the way you spend.

Why do you need a budget? First of all, income does not always equal expenses. A budget is a resource-management tool that can help you achieve your long-term financial objectives, for example, saving more in order to meet retirement goals, freeing up monthly cash flow in order to pay down debt, or simply reducing expenses. Think about the budget simply as a plan for what you're going to do with your money. Here are a few guidelines to help you get started.

1. Track your income and expenses. In order to begin building a realistic budget, you'll need to track your revenue and expenses for at least a month or two. Start by writing out any sums of money that you receive and spend. If you have multiple sources of income, make sure to take all of them into account. For expenses, it may help to list them in order of magnitude. You can even create various categories if it helps you stay organized. The largest expense is probably your mortgage or rent. Then you have utilities (water, heat, electricity), auto expenses (car payment, insurance, gas, maintenance), food, medical/dental expenses (insurance, prescriptions), and so on. The important thing here is not to forget the little expenses. For example, if you go out for lunch, buy a magazine to read on the train, or go out for coffee with your coworkers, these expenses, however insignificant they may seem, need to be included in your budget. They say a small leak can sink a great ship; similarly, a few dollars here and there can add up faster than you think.

2. Start planning ahead. Once you have tracked your income and expenses for awhile, you should have a pretty good idea of where your money comes from and where it goes on a monthly basis. However, some expenses do not happen regularly, and you still need to be prepared for these eventualities. If you anticipate these expenses and include them in your budget, you can plan accordingly without breaking the bank. Some examples of such overlooked expenses are holiday gifts, emergency car repairs, and travel or vacations.

Now you are ready to create your budget. Based on the income and expenses you tracked during the past few months, write down what you expect your income and expenses to be next month, or for the next few months. Try to be as realistic as possible; your budget should reflect your actual financial situation, not your ideal one.

3. Stick to your budget. Creating your budget will be easy compared with sticking to it. It's not a disaster if you spend a few extra dollars here and there, but in next month's budget you should account for them. The budget is a plan, an estimate, but it is in your interest to keep this estimate as accurate as possible. Also, if you notice unusually large expenses where there shouldn't be any, now is the time to adjust them. Keep in mind that your budget should change as your financial situation changes, so monitor it regularly and make changes when necessary.

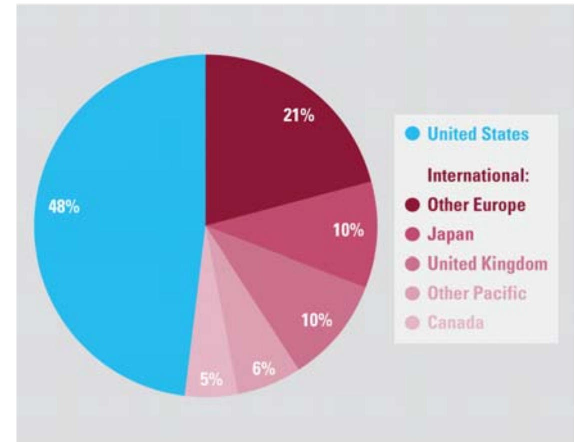
Eventually, a budget is supposed to teach financial discipline and the difference between necessity and luxury. You may be surprised to find out how much money flies out of your pocket for things you don't need and therefore will not use. It may seem that sticking to your budget means making many sacrifices, but ultimately it's your financial future that you're building.

A World of Opportunity

As trade barriers continue to break down, the world economy has become a small neighborhood. Should investors seek to participate in this wave of globalization, or are they getting all they need here at home?

Historically, foreign investments have acted in a significantly different way from domestic investments. When the U.S. market slumped, various opportunities abroad have prospered. An American investor who put some money into foreign markets may have reduced risk while still attaining attractive returns. With the spread of globalization, this benefit decreases as companies across the globe are acting more like each other. However, as the image illustrates, an investor who doesn't take advantage of options outside of the United States is missing out on roughly half of the investable developed stock market opportunities in the world.

World Stock Market Capitalization
Year-End 2009



International investments involve special risks such as fluctuations in currency, foreign taxation, economic and political risks, liquidity risks, and differences in accounting and financial standards.

Source: World Market Capitalization by Country is from the Morgan Stanley Capital International Blue Booksm. The data is expressed in U.S. dollars.

©2010 Morningstar, Inc. All Rights Reserved. The information contained herein (1) is intended solely for informational purposes; (2) is proprietary to Morningstar and/or the content providers; (3) is not warranted to be accurate, complete, or timely; and (4) does not constitute investment advice of any kind. Neither Morningstar nor the content providers are responsible for any damages or losses arising from any use of this information. Past performance is no guarantee of future results. "Morningstar" and the Morningstar logo are registered trademarks of Morningstar, Inc.

James D. Hallett, MSFP CFP AIFA
321 East First Street
P. O. Box 3050
Port Angeles, Washington 98362
jim@hallettadvisors.us
Tel:360-457-6000