Investor Insights & Outlook

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Securing Your Portfolio

There are a number of ways you can protect your portfolio and your financial well being. Chief among them are insurance, estate planning and protection from identity theft. While nobody likes to talk about insurance (except, of course, those who sell it), some individuals should protect themselves with some basic policies. Here are a few examples.

It's a good idea to purchase a life insurance policy when you have a child. You'll want enough coverage to pay off the mortgage and get the kid(s) through college. Health insurance, of course, is a must. Many people jeopardize their retirement planning by not factoring in the cost of health insurance before Medicare kicks in. If you retire before age 65, be sure to investigate the costs. Disability insurance will help you get through an extended period of time without work. Long-term disability coverage typically provides 60% to 70% of your current income should you run into this unfortunate situation. Also, carrying the appropriate property and casualty insurance (homeowner's, auto, for example) can help you avoid liability lawsuits.

Once you have insurance covered, protect your estate. By neglecting the proper estate documents, you run the risk of damaging your assets. A simple will should suffice for many people. Failure to have a will in place upon your death can mean that your spouse or kids won't get what you intended for them. An attorney can put together a will for you or provide you with more information.

And remember: Always protect your identity. We all know how bad it can be to lose a wallet. Identity theft is even worse, and the number of incidents is unfortunately on the rise. A few simple steps can help prevent this from happening: Invest in a shredder and use it on financial papers, and get a copy of your credit report and verify the information on it.

Advisor Corner

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Monthly Market Commentary

Most of the economic news released during the past few weeks pointed toward slow but steady progress in the U.S. economy, despite some market volatility that was attributed to news out of the Federal Reserve. Markets rallied based on a Ben Bernanke speech that suggested the economy was not out of the woods yet and that quantitative easing remained an option if things worsened. Markets also collapsed on the release of the minutes from the Federal Reserve Open Market Committee, which indicated that the economy was stronger than the Fed had anticipated and offered no hints that more quantitative easing was being considered.

Employment: March saw a disappointing 120,000 jobs being added; the lower number was mainly a result of a large decline in private-sector retail jobs and the continued contraction of the public sector. This is a significant drop from the revised 240,000 jobs in February and revised 275,000 jobs in January. The unemployment rate fell slightly, to 8.2%.

Manufacturing: Manufacturing data in February remained mixed but still showed an improvement from January, at least in terms of durable-goods orders. As export demand weakens and growth slows in the auto sector later this spring, Morningstar economists are not expecting a lot of growth (or declines) from manufacturing in 2012. The economic key continues to remain in the hands of U.S. consumers, with a potential added boost from housing and construction markets.

Housing: Real estate data continued to be relatively inconclusive as abnormal weather wreaked havoc on the data, causing most real estate numbers to show better results on a year-over-year basis than on a month-to-month basis. The Case-Shiller Home Price Index (seasonally adjusted) for the three months ending in January was flat compared with December, while the year-over-year numbers showed some improvement. Month-to-month pending contracts for February were down 0.5% and have now declined for two of the last three months, while year-to-year pending contracts were up a stunning 9.2%.

Although the media remains thoroughly confused, with many outlets featuring month-to-month weakness while others ran headlines trumpeting a new boom based on the year-over-year numbers, Morningstar economists believe that the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

Retail: The International Council of Shopping Centers reported 4.1% year-over-year same-store sales growth in March, matching the gains in February. Warm weather and an earlier Easter helped boost the numbers, with both apparel and department stores showing an improved growth rate.

Quarter-end insights: The first quarter of 2012 saw the U.S. economy gaining strength as other world economies slowed. Morningstar economists believe that slow but steady U.S. GDP growth, moderating inflation, and rising employment growth may be on tap for the remainder of the year. While better employment has helped a number of sectors, including housing, restaurants and even health care, other sectors such as industrials continued to worry about slowing demand from Europe and China. Slowdowns in these regions may be harmful to individual companies but not necessarily to the overall U.S. economy—many of those goods are not produced in the U.S. Overall, companies poised to benefit from a relatively strong U.S. economy with limited exposure to non-U.S. markets may be better performers. This includes small-cap companies that typically had a smaller portion of their revenues from non-U.S. sources. Around the world, government data suggests that China's typical 10% growth rate is likely to fall to 7.5%. A slowdown in China combined with a less generous U.S. Federal Reserve will likely bring in commodity prices, significantly affecting commodity-based economies (such as Australia and Brazil) as well as capital goods-related exporters (such as Germany).

Five Key Questions About Long-Term Care Insurance

In addition to typical medical expenses in retirement, you should also consider the cost of long-term care arrangements should you need professional care in your later years, either in-home or in an assisted living facility. There's a good chance you'll need assistance, and it won't be cheap.

According to the 2011 MetLife Market Survey of Nursing Home, Assisted Living, Adult Day Services, and Home Care Costs, the average annual cost for a private room at a nursing home in 2011 was $87,235. The national average for a semi-private room was $78,110. The national average for an individual living in an assisted living community was $41,724.

In most cases, long-term care health insurance coverage provides benefits for nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and home care. If you can afford the premiums, you may want to consider purchasing long-term care insurance. Here are some of the key questions to keep in mind.

How Likely Are You to Need It? This depends on your general health, family history, and expected longevity. For example, if your family has a history of serious medical conditions, dementia, or Alzheimer's disease, you may have a stronger reason to consider this type of insurance.

What's Your Asset Level? Those who come into retirement with less than $250,000 in assets will probably have better uses for their money than paying premiums for long-term care insurance; they may also be eligible for Medicaid if they should need long-term care. Those with more than $2 million in assets may be able to pay for this type of care out of pocket. If your portfolio falls in the middle of this range, however, you may be a good candidate for this type of coverage.

What Kind of Coverage Do You Need/Want? The key differentiator in the pricing of long-term care insurance policies is the amount of daily benefit you're buying; you'll obviously pay more for a policy that pays $150 of your long-term care costs per day versus one that pays just $100. You'll also be able to specify whether you'd like your daily benefit to step up with inflation; even though such a feature will cost you, it's highly advisable given that health-care inflation rates have been far outstripping inflation as a whole during the past few decades.

Another factor to evaluate is the total lifetime benefit. For example, a policy may cover $250,000 in lifetime long-term care benefits, or the lifetime benefit may be unlimited. Some policies are comprehensive, meaning the patient can obtain care in a variety of settings, from a traditional nursing home to care at home. Cheaper policies, however, will only pay for care in a traditional setting, usually a nursing home. Policy costs can also vary based on the length of your elimination period, which is similar in concept to an insurance deductible. If your policy has an elimination period of 30 days, for example, that means you'll have to pay for any long-term care costs you incur in the first 30 days of your illness; after that period has elapsed, your insurer will pick up all or part of the tab, up to your daily benefit amount.

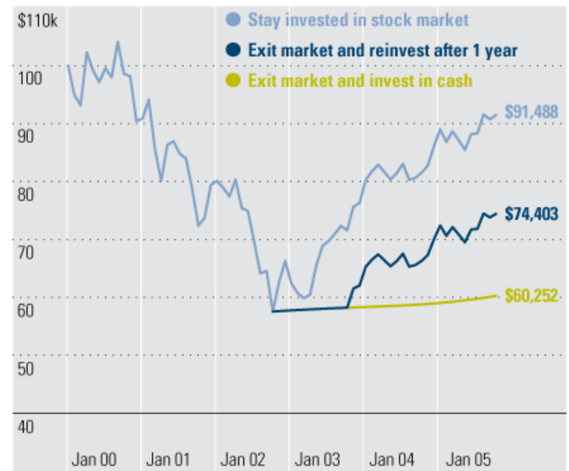
How Would You Like to Pay for That? Under a traditional long-term care policy, you make regular payments during the life of that policy. But you can also customize your payment program, paying for your policy in a single payment, over 10 or 20 years, or until you hit age 65. Such payment options allow you to front-load your payments and reduce your fixed costs in retirement.

How Likely Is the Company to Pay? It probably is a good idea to check up on the insurer's financial strength. Also ask your agent about the insurer's history of raising client long-term care premiums. Although such maneuvers can improve a firm's financial health, they can also present a financial hardship to the insured, a lesson many long-term care policyholders learned the hard way during the past few years.

The Importance of Staying Invested

Investors who attempt to time the market run the risk of missing periods of positive returns. The image illustrates the value of a $100,000 investment in the stock market during 2000–2006, which included the bear market of 2001 and the recovery that followed. The value of the investment dropped to $57,537 by September 2002 (trough date). If an investor remained invested in the market over the next three years, however, the ending value would be $91,488. If an investor exited the market at the bottom to invest in cash for a year and then re-entered, the ending value would be $74,403. An all-cash investment would have yielded only $60,252. Even though the continuous stock-market investment did not recover its initial value after three years, it still provided a higher ending value than the other two strategies. Investors are well advised to stick with a long-term approach to investing.

Ending Wealth Values After a Market Decline



Source: The market is represented by the Standard & Poor's 500®, which is an unmanaged group of securities and considered to be representative of the stock market in general. Cash is represented by the 30-day U.S. Treasury bill. An investment cannot be made directly in an index. The data assumes reinvestment of income and does not account for taxes or transaction costs. Returns and principal invested in stocks are not guaranteed. Stocks have been more volatile than bonds or cash. Holding a portfolio of securities for the long term does not ensure a profitable outcome and investing in securities always involves risk of loss.

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