



Ten Fundamentals of Financial Planning

The stock and bond markets are always uncertain. Investors with sound financial planning take into account the unexpected as well as the expected, and they have peace of mind from doing so.

Here is a checklist of ten financial planning fundamentals with comments about each. These are essential components of a framework for the management of investment portfolios.

1. Include All Assets & Income in Your Financial Plan

Consider every asset and income source including any financial investments, real estate, privately owned businesses, earned income from employment, Social Security, pensions, options, trust income, annuities, life insurance, future inheritance, etc. These assets and their incomes should be carefully analyzed to determine their ability to provide the lifetime funds needed personally and for loved ones.

2. Determine Investment Time Horizon and Asset Allocation

The time horizon for choosing investment allocation is critically important. Funds required for expenditure within one to two years should not be exposed to the stock market. Stocks are volatile, and the potential risk of having to sell them at disadvantaged prices to meet known short-term needs for cash is not worth taking. Conversely, funds required for long term needs such as retirement living expenses and children's education expenses should be invested with a significant portion in equities for high long-term returns. Bonds and other income investments also have an important role to play in investment portfolios. Their

long-term returns have been significantly less than for equities, but they are less volatile and generally offer higher yields of current income.

For investors, time horizon is critical for the determination of asset allocation between equity and income investments. The longer the time horizon, the greater percentage of funds should be allocated to equity investments. The shorter the time horizon, the more should be allocated to income investments. Asset allocation is a dynamic process which changes with circumstances as people age and portfolios grow. A general “rule of thumb” for those at retirement age is an asset allocation of 60% in equities and 40% in income investments. Generally, the older the investor the greater the amount to be invested in income securities. For those who are younger with longer investment horizons a higher percentage in equities may be more appropriate.

3. Diversify Investments to Reduce Risk

Investment portfolios should be well diversified, and it is important to avoid the concentration risk of too much invested in any single investment, no matter how good it may seem to be. Too many eggs in one basket is never a good idea.

4. Maximize After-Tax Returns Consisted with Sound Investment Policy

It's what's left over after taxes that counts. For clients who have both retirement accounts and taxable accounts, high yielding income investments should be in retirement accounts where taxes are deferred. Low yielding equity investments held for appreciation should be in taxable accounts to minimize taxable dividend income and to take advantage of low long-term capital gains taxes when they are sold. Investment balances in retirement accounts should be left there to grow tax free until required minimum distributions are necessary and which should not be exceeded. Tax loss harvesting in taxable accounts should be used to offset capital gain income. Large tax-deductible charitable contributions should be made with highly appreciated stocks from investment accounts, the full market value of which can be used for tax deduction without having to realize capital gain taxes.

Charitable contributions from IRAs can be particularly advantageous because they can be excluded from taxable income. However, distributions from IRAs for those less than age 72 should be avoided if possible to allow IRA investments to grow in value before required minimum distributions become necessary.

Changes in tax law such as those under the SECURE Act should be followed closely for tax planning purposes.

5. Assume Returns of 7% - 8% & Limit Withdrawals to 4% - 5%

Savings and investment goals should be realistically set to provide investment portfolios that meet lifetime financial needs, with average expected net returns on investments not to exceed 7% to 8% per annum and annual expected withdrawals from portfolios not to exceed 4% to 5% per annum. Limiting annual expenses to 4% to 5% withdrawals from investments plus income from other sources should allow both investments and withdrawals from them to increase with inflation over the long run. While there may be exceptions to these investment return and drawdown guidelines depending upon circumstances, they can be sound long-term standards for sustaining the lifetime purchasing power of both principal and income.

6. Do Not Panic & Sell Good Investments at Depressed Prices

When an investment decreases in market value, it should be re-examined for its future prospects, but not necessarily sold. Judging when to buy and when to sell investments based on market sentiment is impossible, and the vagaries of market timing are unfathomable. Do not panic and sell good investments at depressed prices. Consider the remorse of those who sold their stock portfolios at year-end 2008 and in March 2020 and missed the subsequent stock market strong recoveries. Intrinsic investment value is far more important than current price.

7. Cover Catastrophic Risk with Appropriate Insurance

Catastrophic risks should be covered by appropriate insurance, particularly risk exposures to loss of earned income, medical expenses and negligence liability claims. Life insurance and disability insurance to cover loss of employment earnings, comprehensive health insurance to cover medical expenses for all family members and personal liability umbrella insurance to cover potential exposure to negligence lawsuits are all essential. Long term care insurance may also be advisable, depending on affordability, capacity to self-insure, and concern about the adequacy of Medicare and other factors.

8. Keep Debt Manageable at Low Interest Rates

Borrowing must be manageable, avoiding excessive servicing requirements and high interest rates, especially for interest which is not tax deductible. For those who itemize income tax deductions, the interest on a mortgage loan of up to \$750,000 for purchase of a home is tax deductible and generally a good idea. Home mortgage loan rates are still relatively low, and if home mortgage loans with desirable maturities become available at lower rates than currently paid, they should be explored for refinancing. Be sure to include cost consideration of new mortgage loan arrangement and closing fees.

9. Carefully Prepare Life-End & Estate Documents

Everyone should have carefully and professionally prepared life-end and estate planning documents including a current Will, Advanced Medical Directive, Durable Power of Attorney and up to date IRA Beneficiaries. Loved ones should not be burdened with difficult life support, financial management and estate distribution decisions that can be determined in advance.

10. Maintain Financial Records and Work with Competent Professionals

Compile and maintain financial records for all significant assets and liabilities including investment account statements, bank account statements, real estate tax invoices, insurance

policies, mortgage loan statements, and other major asset and liability statements. Be sure to work with trustworthy professionals for all financial needs including:

- Investment Advisor
- Financial Planner
- Accountant with Tax Expertise
- Estate Lawyer
- Banker
- Insurance Agent

Financial records and names of financial professionals with contact information should be made available to will executors and others involved in estate administration. It may also be appropriate, depending upon circumstances, for heirs to be informed about the wills and estates of which they are beneficiaries so they can prepare for future decisions and be effective and responsible in the management of their own ongoing financial plans.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? Well, it is not as simple as it sounds, and it is surprising how many investors do not follow these fundamentals of financial planning, many to their ultimate regret. Don't be one of them!

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