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Despite the early cold weather, the stock market has been on a tear, recently setting several record highs.

Enclosed is some clarity on the earnings reports you hear about, and some foundational guidance on social security.

I also added 10 year-end tax tips to consider, included in the spirit of a soon-to-be-announced additional service for Vision Financial clients. ***Stay tuned!***

Thanksgiving is almost here, reminding us to focus on what matters most, and to be grateful for all we've been given. Here at Vision, we are especially thankful for you, and want to express our appreciation for your business and your trust in helping you manage your resources.

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Vision Financial Advisory Corp

DELIVERING FINANCIAL CLARITY

Earnings Season: What Investors Can Take Away from Corporate Reports

Publicly traded companies are required to report their financial performance to regulators and shareholders on a quarterly basis. Earnings season is the often-turbulent period when most companies disclose their successes and failures.

U.S. companies included in the S&P 500 index suffered year-over-year earnings declines in the first two quarters of 2019.[1] Rising wages and higher material costs (partially due to tariffs imposed on traded goods) had started to cut into profit margins.[2]

Earnings reports are closely watched because they reveal a corporation's bottom line. However, they generally reflect past performance and may have little to do with future results.

Performance lingo

A quarterly report includes unaudited financial statements, a discussion of the business conditions that affected financial results, and some guidance about how the company expects to perform in the following quarters. Financial statements reveal the quarter's profit or net income, which must be calculated according to generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP). This involves subtracting operating expenses (including depreciation, taxes, and other expenses) from net income.

Earnings per share (EPS) represents the portion of total profit that applies to each outstanding share of company stock. EPS is often the figure that makes headlines, because the financial media tend to focus on whether companies meet, beat, or fall short of the consensus estimate of Wall Street analysts. A company can beat the market by losing less money than expected, or can log billions in profits and still disappoint investors who were counting on more.

An earnings surprise — whether EPS comes in above or below expectations — can have an immediate effect on a company's stock price.

Shaping perception

In addition to filing regulatory paperwork, many companies announce their results through press releases, conference calls, and/or webinars so they can influence how the information is judged by analysts, financial media, and investors.

Pro-forma (or adjusted) earnings may exclude nonrecurring expenses such as restructuring costs, interest payments, taxes, and other unique events. Although the Securities and Exchange Commission has rules governing pro-forma financial statements, companies have leeway to highlight the positive and minimize the negative. There may be a vast difference between pro-forma earnings and those calculated according to GAAP.

Many companies also take steps to manage expectations. Issuing profit warnings or positive revisions to previous forecasts may prompt analysts to adjust their estimates accordingly. Companies may also be able to time certain business moves to help meet quarterly earnings targets.

The media hype surrounding an earnings surprise can sometimes draw attention away from important details that may be revealed in a company's quarterly report. Factors such as sales growth, research and development, new products, consumer trends, government policies, and global economic conditions can all affect a company's longer-term prospects.

The return and principal value of stocks fluctuate with changes in market conditions. Shares, when sold, may be worth more or less than their original cost. The S&P 500 is an unmanaged group of securities that is considered to be representative of the U.S. stock market in general. The performance of an unmanaged index is not indicative of the performance of any specific investment. Individuals cannot invest directly in an index.

1 FactSet, August 9, 2019

2 Reuters, April 9, 2019

Ten Year-End Tax Tips for 2019

Here are 10 things to consider as you weigh potential tax moves between now and the end of the year.

1. Set aside time to plan

Effective planning requires that you have a good understanding of your current tax situation, as well as a reasonable estimate of how your circumstances might change next year. There's a real opportunity for tax savings if you'll be paying taxes at a lower rate in one year than in the other. However, the window for most tax-saving moves closes on December 31, so don't procrastinate.

2. Defer income to next year

Consider opportunities to defer income to 2020, particularly if you think you may be in a lower tax bracket then. For example, you may be able to defer a year-end bonus or delay the collection of business debts, rents, and payments for services. Doing so may enable you to postpone payment of tax on the income until next year.

3. Accelerate deductions

You might also look for opportunities to accelerate deductions into the current tax year. If you itemize deductions, making payments for deductible expenses such as medical expenses, qualifying interest, and state taxes before the end of the year (instead of paying them in early 2020) could make a difference on your 2019 return.

4. Factor in the AMT

If you're subject to the alternative minimum tax (AMT), traditional year-end maneuvers such as deferring income and accelerating deductions can have a negative effect. Essentially a separate federal income tax system with its own rates and rules, the AMT effectively disallows a number of itemized deductions. For example, if you're subject to the AMT in 2019, prepaying 2020 state and local taxes probably won't help your 2019 tax situation, but could hurt your 2020 bottom line. Taking the time to determine whether you may be subject to the AMT before you make any year-end moves could help you avoid a costly mistake.

5. Bump up withholding to cover a tax shortfall

If it looks as though you're going to owe federal income tax for the year, especially if you think you may be subject to an estimated tax penalty, consider asking your employer (on Form W-4) to increase your withholding for the remainder of the year to cover the shortfall. The biggest advantage in doing so is that withholding is considered as having been paid evenly throughout the year instead of when the dollars are actually taken from your paycheck. This strategy can also be used to make up for low or missing quarterly estimated tax payments. With all the recent tax changes, it may be especially important to review your withholding in 2019.

6. Maximize retirement savings

Deductible contributions to a traditional IRA and pre-tax contributions to an employer-sponsored retirement plan such as a 401(k) can reduce your 2019 taxable income. If you haven't already contributed up to the maximum amount allowed, consider doing so by year-end.

7. Take any required distributions

Once you reach age 70½, you generally must start taking required minimum distributions (RMDs) from traditional IRAs and employer-sponsored retirement plans (an exception may apply if you're still working for the employer sponsoring the plan). Take any distributions by the date required — the end of the year for most individuals. The penalty for failing to do so is substantial: 50% of any amount that you failed to distribute as required.

8. Weigh year-end investment moves

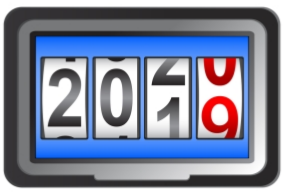
You shouldn't let tax considerations drive your investment decisions. However, it's worth considering the tax implications of any year-end investment moves that you make. For example, if you have realized net capital gains from selling securities at a profit, you might avoid being taxed on some or all of those gains by selling losing positions. Any losses over and above the amount of your gains can be used to offset up to $3,000 of ordinary income ($1,500 if your filing status is married filing separately) or carried forward to reduce your taxes in future years.

9. Beware the net investment income tax

Don't forget to account for the 3.8% net investment income tax. This additional tax may apply to some or all of your net investment income if your modified adjusted gross income (AGI) exceeds $200,000 ($250,000 if married filing jointly, $125,000 if married filing separately, $200,000 if head of household).

10. Get help if you need it

There's a lot to think about when it comes to tax planning. That's why it often makes sense to talk to a tax professional who is able to evaluate your situation and help you determine if any year-end moves make sense for you.



Timing of itemized deductions and the increased standard deduction

Recent tax law changes substantially increased the standard deduction amounts and made significant changes to itemized deductions. It may now be especially useful to bunch itemized deductions in certain years; for example, when they would exceed the standard deduction.

IRA and retirement plan contributions

For 2019, you can contribute up to $19,000 to a 401(k) plan ($25,000 if you're age 50 or older) and up to $6,000 to traditional and Roth IRAs combined ($7,000 if you're age 50 or older). The window to make 2019 contributions to an employer plan generally closes at the end of the year, while you typically have until the due date of your federal income tax return (not including extensions) to make 2019 IRA contributions.

Social Security: Shoring Up America's Safety Net

Future projections

In 2019, the trustees of Social Security reported that the Old-Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI) trust fund is projected to run out in 2034. At that time, payroll tax revenue alone would be sufficient to pay 77% of scheduled benefits.

Ever since a legal secretary named Ida May Fuller received the first Social Security retirement check in 1940, Americans have been counting on Social Security to provide much-needed retirement income. For many older Americans, Social Security is their main source of guaranteed retirement income — income that continues throughout their lifetimes and is indexed for inflation every year (in 2019, the cost-of-living adjustment, or COLA, was 2.8%).

Social Security provides more than just retirement income, though. It also provides disability and survivor insurance benefits. About 62 million people — more than one in six U.S. residents — collected some type of Social Security benefit in 2018, with approximately 80% of these recipients receiving Social Security retirement or survivor benefits.[1]

How Social Security works

Social Security is a pay-as-you-go system, which means that payments from current workers (in the form of payroll taxes) fund benefits for current beneficiaries. The payroll tax rate for Social Security is 12.4%, with 6.2% paid by the employee and 6.2% paid by the employer (self-employed individuals pay the entire 12.4%). These payroll taxes are deposited into the Old-Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI) trust fund (for retirement and survivor benefits) and the Disability Insurance (DI) trust fund (for disability payments).

Because of demographic and economic factors, including higher retirement rates and lower birth rates, there will be fewer workers per beneficiary over the long term, worsening the strain on the trust funds. This year, the trustees of Social Security reported that the OASI trust fund is projected to run out in 2034. After that, payroll tax revenue alone would be sufficient to pay 77% of scheduled benefits.

Ideas for reform

There has been little national consensus by policymakers on how to deal with Social Security's looming demographic challenges. Meaningful reform will require broad bipartisan support, and the trustees have urged Congress to address Social Security's challenges sooner rather than later, so that solutions will be less drastic and can be implemented gradually, lessening the impact on the public.

Some Social Security reform proposals on the table include:

- Raising the current Social Security payroll tax rate — according to the 2019 trustees report, an immediate and permanent payroll tax increase to 15.1% (up from the current 12.4%) would be necessary to address the long-range revenue shortfall (16.05% if the increase started in 2035)
- Raising or eliminating the ceiling on wages currently subject to Social Security payroll taxes ($132,900 in 2019)
- Raising the full retirement age beyond the currently scheduled age of 67 (for anyone born in 1960 or later)
- Reducing future benefits — to address the long-term revenue shortfall, the trustees have noted that scheduled benefits would have to be immediately and permanently reduced by about 17% for all current and future beneficiaries, or by approximately 20% if reductions were applied only to those who initially become eligible for benefits in 2019 or later
- Changing the formula that is used to calculate benefits
- Changing the formula that is used to calculate the annual cost-of-living adjustment for benefits

Understand your retirement benefits

The amount you'll receive from Social Security is based on the number of years you've worked, the amount you've earned over your lifetime, and the age when you file for benefits. Your benefit is calculated using a formula that takes into account your 35 highest earnings years, but you don't need to work for that long to qualify for retirement benefits. Generally, you need to have earned a minimum of 40 work credits, which is about 10 years of work in a job covered by Social Security. If you haven't worked long enough to qualify on your own, you may qualify for spousal benefits based on your spouse's work record. A spousal benefit claimed at your full retirement age is generally equal to 50% of the primary worker's full benefit.

You can get an estimate of your future Social Security retirement benefits by visiting the Social Security website at ssa.gov and using the Retirement Estimator tool or by viewing your Social Security Statement. Your personalized statement contains a detailed record of your earnings history, as well as estimates of the retirement, survivor, and disability benefits you can expect at different ages. To view your statement online, you'll first need to register. If you haven't registered online, you'll receive your Social Security Statement in the mail every year if you are age 60 or older and not yet receiving benefits.

[1] Top Ten Facts About Social Security, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, August 14, 2018

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How long could it take to double your money?

If you're saving for college, retirement, or a large purchase, it can be useful to quickly calculate how an anticipated annual rate of return will affect your money over time. To find out, you can use a mathematical concept known as the Rule of 72. This rule can give you a close approximation of how long it would take for your money to double at any given rate of return, assuming annual compounding.

To use this rule, you simply divide 72 by your anticipated annual rate of return. The result is the approximate number of years it will take for your money to double.

For example, if your anticipated annual rate of return is 6%, you would divide 72 by 6. Your money can be expected to double in about 12 years. But if your anticipated annual rate of return is 8%, then your money can be expected to double in about 9 years.

The Rule of 72 can also be used to determine what rate of return you would need to double your money in a certain number of years. For example, if you have 12 years to double your money, then dividing 72 by 12 would tell you that you would need a rate of return of 6%.

Another way to use the Rule of 72 is to determine when something will be halved instead of doubled. For example, if you would like to estimate how long it would take for annual inflation to eat into your savings, you could divide 72 by the rate of inflation. For example, if inflation is 3%, then it would take 24 years for your money to be worth half its current value. If inflation jumped to 4%, then it would take only 18 years for your purchasing power to be halved.

Although using a calculator will give you more precise results, the Rule of 72 is a useful shortcut that can help you understand how long it might take to reach a financial goal, and what annual rate of return you might need to get there.

Do independent living communities differ from CCRCs?

Independent living communities, also known as rental retirement communities, offer housing options for active seniors and retirees who require little or no assistance with daily activities. Most independent living residents desire an environment where they don't have to be concerned about safety, maintenance, and homeownership responsibilities.

One of the major offshoots of the burgeoning number of baby boomers retiring every day is the growing retirement living industry. More and more communities dedicated to senior living are opening each year. Two popular options are continuing care retirement communities (CCRCs) and independent living communities. While there are similarities between the two, there are important differences as well.

Both CCRCs and independent living communities may offer amenities such as a clubhouse, lounge, dining rooms, fitness centers, swimming pools, housekeeping services, and transportation. CCRCs usually offer a higher level of amenities and services than independent living communities.

The main difference between CCRCs and independent living communities is the extent of health-related, or continuing care, services offered by CCRCs, which include assisted living services, memory care, and long-term care. Independent living communities typically do not offer continuing care services. Instead, the resident may arrange for such services through an outside agency. Generally, independent living communities do not offer assisted living services or long-term care.

Another difference between CCRCs and independent living communities relates to the costs. Most CCRCs require a substantial entry fee plus a monthly fee. Typically, independent living communities charge a monthly fee, similar to rent. Independent living fees are usually not covered by any type of insurance, including Medicare and long-term care insurance. However, health-related services and care that a resident receives (which are not offered by the independent resident community) may be covered by insurance or Medicare.

Determining which type of community is the best choice depends on a number of factors including the services needed or desired and the costs associated with each type of residential community.