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I'm ba-a-a-ck. It seems like I've been out of the office a lot lately with both my mission trip to Honduras and family vacation to San Diego, but I'm back now with no plans to go anywhere for a while. So it's back to year-end reports and filings.

We did enjoy a great family vacation in San Diego, introducing our grandkids to the beauty of southern California and all it has to offer, then spending time with Kati's SoCal relatives. The temps in the 60s and 70s were a welcome respite from our harsh Wisconsin winter.

At least the investment markets thawed in February, recovering from their January declines so that portfolios are now on positive return footing for the year and we'll soon be fully invested again for the first time in quite a while. Have a great March and keep your eyes out for some sign of Spring!

Bruce Heling, CFP CPA

March 2014

What Baseball Can Teach You about Financial Planning

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 **HELING ASSOCIATES**
Bringing the Personal to Financial Planning

THE PERSONAL PLANNER

Personal Financial Planning Tips for Today and the Rest of Your Life

What Baseball Can Teach You about Financial Planning



Spring training is a tradition that baseball teams and baseball fans look forward to every year. No matter how they did last year, teams in spring training are full of hope that a new season will bring a fresh start. As this year's baseball season gets under way, here are a few lessons from America's pastime that might help you reevaluate your finances.

Sometimes you need to proceed one base at a time

There's nothing like seeing a home run light up the scoreboard, but games are often won by singles and doubles that get runners in scoring position through a series of base hits. The one base at a time approach takes discipline, something that you can apply to your finances by putting together a financial plan. What are your financial goals? Do you know how much money comes in, and how much goes out? Are you saving regularly for retirement or for a child's college education? A financial plan will help you understand where you are now and help you decide where you want to go.

It's a good idea to cover your bases

Baseball players minimize the odds that a runner will safely reach a base by standing close to the base to protect it. What can you do to help protect your financial future? Try to prepare for life's "what-ifs." For example, buy the insurance coverage you need to make sure you and your family are protected--this could be life, health, disability, long-term care, or property and casualty insurance. And set up an emergency account that you can tap instead of dipping into your retirement funds or using a credit card when an unexpected expense arises.

You can strike out looking, or strike out swinging

Fans may have trouble seeing strikeouts in a positive light, but every baseball player knows that striking out is a big part of the game. In fact, striking out is much more common than getting hits. The record for the highest career

bating average record is .366, held by Ty Cobb. Or, as Ted Williams once said, "Baseball is the only field of endeavor where a man can succeed three times out of ten and be considered a good performer."

In baseball, there's even more than one way to strike out. A batter can strike out looking by not swinging at a pitch, or strike out swinging by attempting, but failing, to hit a pitch. In both cases, the batter likely waited for the right pitch, which is sometimes the best course of action, even if it means striking out occasionally.

So how does this apply to your finances? First, accept the fact that you're going to have hits and misses, but that doesn't mean you should stop looking for financial opportunities. For example, when investing, you have no control over how the market is going to perform, but you can decide what to invest in and when to buy and sell, according to your investment goals and tolerance for risk.

Warren Buffett, who is a big fan of Ted Williams, strongly believes in waiting for the right pitch. "What's nice about investing is you don't have to swing at pitches," Buffett said. "You can watch pitches come in one inch above or one inch below your navel, and you don't have to swing. No umpire is going to call you out. You can wait for the pitch you want."

Note: All investing involves risk, including the possible loss of principal.

Every day is a brand-new ball game

When the trailing team ties the score (often unexpectedly), the announcer shouts, "It's a whole new ball game!" Or, as Yogi Berra famously put it, "It ain't over 'til it's over." Whether your investments haven't performed as expected, or you've spent too much money, or you haven't saved enough, there's always hope if you're willing to learn both from what you've done right and from what you've done wrong. Pitcher and hall-of-famer Bob Feller may have said it best. "Every day is a new opportunity. You can build on yesterday's success or put its failures behind and start over again. That's the way life is, with a new game every day, and that's the way baseball is."

What's New in the World of Higher Education?

Whether your son or daughter is expecting college decisions any day now or whether you're planning ahead for future years, here's what's new in the world of higher education.

Costs for 2013/2014

Question: What goes up every year no matter what the economy at large is doing? Answer: The cost of college. The reasons are many and varied, but suffice it to say that this year, like every year, college costs increased yet again.

For the 2013/2014 year, the average cost at a 4-year public college is \$22,826, while the average cost at a private college is \$44,750, though many private colleges charge over \$60,000 per year (Source: The College Board, Trends in College Pricing 2013). Cost figures include tuition, fees, room and board, books, and a sum for transportation and personal expenses.

What's a parent to do? For starters, check out net price calculators. Now required on all college websites, net price calculators can help families estimate how much grant aid a student might be eligible for at a particular college based on his or her individual academic and financial profile and the school's own criteria for awarding institutional aid. You'll definitely want to spend some time running numbers on different net price calculators to see how schools stack up against one another on the generosity scale.

New rates on federal student loans

Last summer, new legislation changed the way interest rates are set for federal Stafford and PLUS Loans. Rates are now tied to the 10-year Treasury note, instead of being artificially set by Congress. For the current academic year (July 1, 2013, through June 30, 2014), the rates are:

- 3.8% for undergraduate students borrowing subsidized and unsubsidized Stafford Loans
- 5.4% for graduate students borrowing unsubsidized Stafford Loans
- 6.4% for parents borrowing PLUS Loans

The rates are determined as of June 1 each year and are locked in for the life of the loan.

A renewed focus on IBR

Federal student loans are the preferred way to borrow for college because they offer a unique repayment option called "income based repayment," or IBR. Under IBR, a borrower's monthly student loan payment is based on income and family size and is equal to 10% of discretionary income. After 20 years of on-time payments, all remaining debt is generally forgiven (loans are forgiven after 10 years for

those in qualified public service).

Enrollment in the program has been relatively modest, but last fall, the Department of Education contacted borrowers who were having difficulty repaying their student loans to let them know about IBR. The department also put the IBR application online and has made it possible for applicants to import information from their tax returns.

A government push for information

Last summer, as part of his push to make college more affordable, President Obama announced a proposal that would require colleges to report the average debt load and earnings of graduates (in addition to the information on tuition costs and graduation rates that they already report), with the availability of federal financial aid being linked to those ratings. In response, most colleges have cried foul, claiming that average debt is not a valid indicator of affordability because colleges have vastly different endowments and abilities to award institutional aid, and that post-graduation salaries can depend on variables outside of a college's control. No reporting requirement has been finalized yet, but the trend is clearly toward the government requiring colleges to make their costs and return on investment as transparent as possible so families can make more informed choices.

The growth of MOOCs

You may have heard the term "MOOCs," and going forward, it's likely you'll hear it a lot more. MOOCs stands for "massive open online courses," and these large-scale, online classes have the potential to revolutionize higher education. One of the earliest MOOCs was a course on artificial intelligence at Stanford University in 2011, which attracted 160,000 students from all over the world (though only 23,000 successfully completed the course, earning a certificate of recognition).

Today, hundreds of MOOCs are offered free of charge by many well-known, leading universities. The piece of the puzzle that has yet to be solved is what credit or degree will be given when courses are completed and how pricing will work. But the combination of quality courses, robust online learning technology, and the wide availability of broadband, coupled with the very high cost of a traditional college education, makes it likely that the popularity of MOOCs will only grow in the future, whether people enroll to earn serious credentials or simply for their own enjoyment and curiosity.



The appeal of MOOCs

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Home Staging: Getting Your Home Ready to Sell



In today's competitive housing market, your home's appearance plays an important role in determining how quickly it will sell. Before you put your home on the market, many real estate professionals recommend doing at least some form of home staging.

Fortunately, there are a number of things you can do to stage your home for selling that take only a little time and effort, and more importantly, won't break the bank.

Be sure to make a good first impression

When it comes to selling your home, first impressions are important. A yard that is overgrown and poorly maintained can turn off a potential buyer before he or she even walks through your front door.

But keep in mind that you don't have to have a green thumb or hire an expensive landscape designer to make a difference. You can make the outside of your home more welcoming by:

- Cutting grassy areas that are overgrown
- Trimming trees and shrubbery--especially those that are near or next to the house
- Clearing walkways and paths so visitors can easily enter/exit your home
- Giving your front door a fresh coat of paint
- Making sure outdoor lighting is adequate/updated

Create a welcoming environment

When potential buyers first walk through your front door, you'll want them to feel comfortable and at ease. You can create a welcoming environment with a few minor touches such as fresh flowers in the entryway or the smell of freshly baked cookies.

Give your home a thorough cleaning

Never underestimate the impact a clean home can have on a potential buyer. Dust on shelves, mildew in the bathroom, and dirty carpets can be huge deterrents when selling a home.

Before you put your home on the market, you'll want to give it a thorough cleaning from top to bottom. If it's a big enough job, you may even want to enlist the services of a professional cleaning company to assist you with the cleanup.

Remove clutter

Removing clutter from your home will make it seem more functional, spacious, and organized--all important features for a potential homebuyer.

While it can sometimes seem overwhelming to have to sift through and organize all of your

personal belongings, you can get started with these simple tips:

- Clean out closets and install closet organizers
- If home office space is limited, add shelves and storage bins to hide office clutter
- Remove any personal effects, such as photos, mementos, and even toiletries
- In addition to main living spaces, be sure to clean out attic, basement, and garage spaces
- Rent a dumpster or hire a waste disposal company to make it easier to get rid of larger, unwanted items or consider donating unwanted items that are in good condition to a charitable organization
- If necessary, hire a professional organizer

Invest in a fresh coat of paint

Dated wall treatments, such as wallpaper borders and faux finishes, can deter a potential buyer. A fresh coat of paint is a cost effective way to give your home an updated appearance.

When picking out paint colors, be sure to stick to neutral color schemes, which tend to have a broader appeal. In addition, remember that darker colors often make rooms seem smaller and more intimate, while lighter colors can make a room appear larger and more spacious.

Hold off on major improvements/upgrades

Except in certain circumstances, most home staging projects should only involve minor improvements to your home that won't take up much of your time or cost you a lot of money. As a result, you should hold off on major improvements or upgrades, such as renovating an entire kitchen or putting on a new addition.

Get professional help if needed

If you feel that you need assistance staging your home before you put it on the market, there are staging professionals and companies that assist homeowners during the home-staging process.

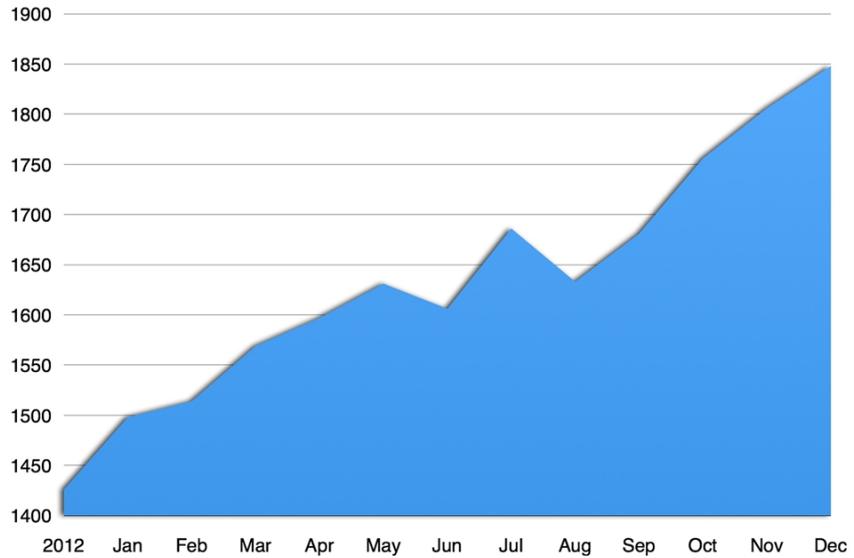
The cost of professional home staging varies, depending on the types of services provided. Basic staging services usually offer simple advice and tips for organizing and cleaning your home. Other, more involved staging services provide full home redesigns along with specially staged furnishings and accessories.

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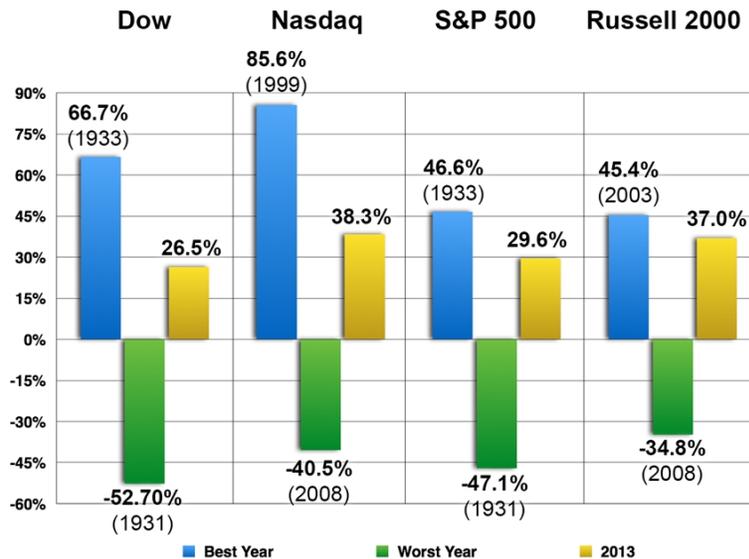
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Graph: The S&P 500 Month by Month in 2013



Past performance is no guarantee of future results, but stocks had an extraordinary run in 2013. The Standard & Poor's 500 set 45 new all-time closing records during the year and by November had surpassed 1,800 for the first time ever. Despite some stumbles during the summer, by the end of 2013 the index had nearly tripled since its March 2009 financial-crisis low. **Note: All investing involves risk, including the possible loss of principal.**

Graph: The Best of Times, the Worst of Times, and 2013



In 2013, the Standard & Poor's 500 had its best year since 1997, while the Dow Jones Industrial Average set 52 new record closing highs and the Nasdaq hit a level it hadn't seen in more than 13 years. Here's how 2013's price gains compare to each index's best and worst years since 1926 by percentage gain as listed in the "Stock Trader's Almanac 2014." **Note: All investing involves risk, including the possible loss of principal.**