



Why Wealth Preservation?

foreword

In investment commentary, reviews and outlooks, the emphasis tends to be on 'whats' and 'hows' – what has happened, what needs to change, and how things will or might come about.

Much less attention is paid to the big questions of 'why'. Of course some why questions – why a particular event happened – are often asked. But the rarer investment 'why' questions are those that go slightly deeper. They tackle subjects such as why we invest in the way that we do, or why we hold a particular investment belief to be true. They require reflection, consideration of alternatives, and drill down to the level of underlying assumptions.

On the following pages, we ask and seek to answer a central why question for our clients and our business: why do we focus on real wealth preservation?

In addressing this why, our aim is to explain the thinking behind our investment whats and hows.



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Looking after the goose

Making the case for prioritising real wealth preservation.

Once upon a time there was a countryman who owned the most wonderful goose you can imagine. Every morning the countryman visited its nest to find the goose had laid a beautiful, glittering, golden egg.

In Aesop's fable, the countryman takes the eggs to market, and soon becomes rich. Life is going well, until he becomes impatient. The goose is *only* laying one golden egg a day. The countryman is hungry for more and has an idea: kill the goose, cut it open, and get hold of all of her golden eggs at once.

At this point in the tale, engaged children cry out to the countryman urging him not to do it. But Aesop holds the tension and moves swiftly to the denouement: the countryman cuts the goose open and finds no golden eggs. His once-precious goose is now dead.

In this article, we address the topic of why we focus on wealth preservation when investing for our clients. We have started with Aesop because he makes our point well for those who like a quick read: if you have a gold-laying goose, your main goal should be to keep her healthy and safe for many years to come. Optimising her output for short-term gains, or outperforming a peer group of other mythical creatures, should take a back seat.

Starting with the owners

To answer the question 'why wealth preservation?' we first need to be clear on who the wealth belongs to.

Put simply, for some of our clients, their wealth has already been created; others are still actively creating wealth.

To expand on our fable, some of our clients have already bred their geese and are no longer engaged in avian alchemy. As a result, their capital is precious, and usually irreplaceable. This could be an entrepreneur who has sold her main business, a businessman approaching retirement, a charity that has received wealth as a gift from others, or the families and descendants of wealth creators.

By contrast, other clients have a goose farm that is still in full operation. While most of their wealth will usually be tied-up with their business, some is available to be invested.

What these clients tend to need most from their investments is diversification. To stretch our fable to breaking point, they need investments they can depend on in the event that their geese get struck down by a nasty bout of avian flu. In practice, this means a portfolio focused on real wealth preservation.

Sketching a definition

A caricature of wealth preservation is that it is a close cousin of stuffing money under the mattress. An investment strategy that is dull, and lacks ambition.

The reality is different. When investing, we are seeking to preserve and grow our clients' wealth for decades to come. This means keeping ahead of inflation, so that we maintain and increase our clients' purchasing power in the real world. To do that, we need to achieve growth, but we want to achieve this growth in a way that is prudent, thereby avoiding large and irrecoverable losses along the way.

From that brief sketch of wealth preservation, we can pull out four parts: *outpacing inflation*, *achieving prudent growth*, *avoiding large losses*, and *over the long term*.

If these four parts were items on a menu, it would be easy to serve up just one or two of the dishes. For example, anyone with a bank account can avoid the losses without beating inflation. An amateur investor can achieve growth that seems prudent for five years but turns out to be reckless in the sixth.

To vary the metaphor, the challenge comes when bringing the four ingredients together: the wealth preservation recipe looks easy, but the skill comes when actually doing the cooking.

Risk in review

Another way to understand our approach to wealth preservation is through the perspective of risk. Financial writer and historian William Bernstein gives a good working

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In investing, it is important to distinguish between shallow and deep risk.

definition of investment risk as the *size of loss of real capital* multiplied by *the duration of the loss of real capital*. For those who don't like equations, even thematic ones without any numbers, this is really just stating that there are two main dimensions to a capital loss: its depth (how much is lost) and its duration (how long the loss lasts).

Flowing from that definition, Bernstein makes a valuable distinction between 'shallow risk' and 'deep risk'. Shallow risk is temporary. It involves a loss of capital that recovers within anywhere from several weeks to two or three years. This risk comes from the regular and inevitable swings in asset prices that are a permanent feature of the financial markets.

In a world of 24-hour news, shallow risk tends to be overemphasised. Events that will lose their investment significance in a matter of days or weeks often dominate the headlines, capturing a lot of attention and creating unhelpful distractions.

By contrast, deep risk is permanent. It involves an irrecoverable loss of real capital. This could come from an individual investment that collapses in price and never recovers, or an investment that is sold after a price collapse, preventing the investor from enjoying any subsequent rebound. At a portfolio level, deep risk would involve a large capital loss, and related negative real returns, that span ten, twenty, or thirty years.

In Bernstein's words, shallow risk, if handled properly, "deprives you only of sleep for a while; deep risk deprives you of sustenance."

What does this mean for our approach to wealth preservation? First, we are seeking to manage the shallow risks properly for our clients, in a way that, we hope, doesn't deprive them of sleep. Here, we believe communication is almost as important as action.

At the same time, we want to avoid deep risks. This may seem so obvious as to be hardly worth stating, but consider the investment climate today. A traditional bond portfolio

may feel like a low-risk option; to us it looks stuffed full of deep risk, offering little protection against a rise in inflation.

Bringing these two strands together, we also need to remain proactive and avoid complacency. In our experience, most deep risk begins life looking shallow.

Considering the alternatives

Having outlined who we are investing for and how we understand wealth preservation, it is also worth considering some of the main alternatives to a preservation-first investment approach.

This must begin with the business we're in. In our view, the role of a wealth manager is not to deliver striking fifty- or hundred-fold gains: that is the realm of entrepreneurship. Similarly, betting on promising new businesses or the next big thing is best left to venture capitalists.

As part of a broad asset allocation, these entrepreneurial and venture capital investments can (and often do) sit happily alongside a wealth preservation portfolio. However, the objectives, risks and potential returns in each area are very different, and so are the levels of excitement.

Our approach may feel pedestrian when compared with founding a business or investing in what might become the next Twitter or Tesla. Yet we are convinced that wealth preservation is the right objective, for every wealth owner, for some or all of their liquid assets.

In the words of Nathan Mayer Rothschild in the early 1800s, while it requires "a great deal of boldness and a great deal of caution to make a great fortune", keeping that fortune "requires ten times as much wit."

We have noted previously how versions of the phrase "from sandals to sandals in three generations" crop up in many languages and cultures. It seems to describe a near-universal experience: a fortune is made, but is not safeguarded. Because wealth preservation is neglected, the grandchildren return to the poverty their grandparents started out in.

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“Investment is an effort, which should be successful, to prevent a lot of money from becoming a little.” Fred Schwed, 1940, in *Where are the customers' yachts? A good hard look at Wall Street*

Buying the market

Within the public financial markets, an alternative to a wealth preservation portfolio is to be fully invested in equities all of the time. At first glance, the case for doing so seems strong: if equities deliver the best returns over the long term, why not invest 100% of a portfolio in stocks? I'm a long-term investor, why do I need diversification?

First, it is worth noting these questions tend to be highly cyclical. In 2002 after the dotcom bubble burst, or in 2008 at the height of the financial crisis, these questions were on mute. As equity markets recover, the volume tends to rise. When stocks are booming, and irrational exuberance takes hold, the chatter often reaches a din.

In addressing the questions themselves, we should stress that we are big believers in long-term equity ownership. The bulk of our portfolios are invested in wealth-creating return assets, the vast majority of which are linked to the stock market. We see these investments as an essential part of delivering real wealth preservation and growth.

The issue as we see it is not whether to own equities, but instead how much of a portfolio should be invested in stocks. This, for us, is always a function of the available opportunities, and never determined by a fixed allocation set by a template. We select investments on their merits, looking both at the risks and the long-term returns we expect them to produce. Our allocation to equities will therefore vary over time; setting it to 100% might force us to buy equities in periods when we see them as very expensive.

Appetite for losses

Over the very long term, a portfolio invested 100% in equities may outperform our approach. Yet equities do not always deliver the best returns, even over long periods, and most investors prove to be deeply uncomfortable with both the volatility and periodic large falls in portfolio value that inevitably come with an equity-only approach.

Consider Japan. Someone who invested 100% in the Japanese stock market during the late 1980s would have enjoyed spectacular growth – until the market bubble burst. From January 1990 to January 2000, this investor would have lost 35%, even when allowing for the reinvestment of all dividends (using data from the Topix Total Return index). By January 2010, after twenty years, the situation would actually be worse rather than better: the fully-invested Japanese equity portfolio would be down 61% from the reference point in 1990.

By any sensible measure, this is deep risk, particularly when you factor in the 'opportunity cost', or the gains this investor would have enjoyed if he or she had spent these two decades invested elsewhere.

In recent memory, the Japanese experience has been rare, but at the risk of sounding like a financial disclaimer, past performance is no guarantee of future results, and recent memory is not a good guide to financial history.

Looking ahead to the next twenty years, there is no guarantee that investing solely in equities will deliver the best results. To offer a question back to the questioner: if your capital is precious and irreplaceable, do you really need to take on such a high level of risk?

The emotional factor

The psychological aspect of investing also speaks for wealth preservation. Van Gogh rightly identified the “little emotions” as the “great captains of our lives”, captains we obey without knowing it. *Homo economicus* – the Spock-like super-rational utility-maximiser – is a fictional character, existing only in the textbooks of classical economics.

Without getting into the minutiae of prospect theory, it is worth noting that, as humans, we tend to be asymmetrical in our responses to financial gains and losses. In simple terms, the pain we feel from a 10% loss exceeds the pleasure we experience from a 10% gain. In fact, some studies in behavioural economics suggest that losses have more than twice the psychological impact of equivalent gains.

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“How goes the Stock, becomes the gen’ral Cry. Rather than fail we’ll at Nine Hundred Buy.”
Alexander Pope, on the South Sea bubble

More broadly, we see psychological and emotional discipline as one of the essential traits for investing and wealth preservation, a trait that has no correlation to intellect.

Isaac Newton illustrates this well. In 1720, Newton owned shares in the South Sea Company. As popular enthusiasm for the stock exploded, he sold his shares, making a 100% gain and a profit of £7,000. This was a substantial sum for Newton, and equivalent to roughly £1 million today.

So far, so good. But after Newton sold his holdings, the market euphoria continued. Shares in the South Sea Company continued to surge higher. Newton then re-entered the market, buying a much larger position at a price three times higher than he’d paid for his initial stake. Shortly afterwards, the bubble burst. Newton sold his shares again, but this time losing around £20,000.

Reflecting on his experience, Newton said he could “calculate the motions of the heavenly bodies, but not the madness of people.” In failing to prioritise preservation over growth, and to master the emotional side of investing, Newton lost almost all his life savings.

No mood to party

Let’s now return to a fictional couple 100% invested in equities. Their investment journey hasn’t been as wild as Newton’s, but let’s say it’s New Year’s Eve 2008 and instead of going out to a party they’ve decided to stay home to work out what to do about their investments.

The financial crisis is raging, the banking sector seems to be on the edge of collapse, and their portfolio is down 40% on the year. They feel they have lost nearly half of their wealth and are understandably nervous about what 2009 might bring. In this scenario, almost everybody presses the panic button, deciding to sell some or all of their equity holdings. In doing so, they experience an unforgettably painful deep risk.

To quote William Bernstein again, without “the liquid and safe reserves” that are an essential part of a wealth preservation portfolio “you will not have the wherewithal to weather the

... setbacks that come with turbulent markets, to purchase stocks at low prices, and to keep your courage up when it’s needed most.”

The nature of investing

The final part of our answer to the question ‘why preservation’ is perhaps the least surprising: we believe it is the best investment strategy.

Here, we will just briefly state that a focus on wealth preservation and having a ‘margin of safety’ has been a feature of the investing styles of many of the great investors we admire, from John Maynard Keynes to Benjamin Graham to Warren Buffett.

Maths is also on the side of preservation. If you experience an investment loss of 50%, you have to then double your money just to get back to where you started. If you lose 80% of your capital, the equivalent gain required is 400%. By contrast, an investment that steadily compounds at an average of 7% annually will double in value over a decade and nearly quadruple over twenty years. Harnessing this cumulative power of compounding – the regular re-investment of gains over time – has rightly been called the ‘eighth wonder of the world’.

Conclusion

Given the business we are in, the clients we are serving, the history of financial markets, human psychology and the perennial need for discipline when investing, we believe our focus on real wealth preservation and growth is wise and prudent.

Conceptually, real wealth preservation is simple. The challenge comes with actually delivering it, consistently and well, over the long term.

Notes

Rothschild's Wealth Management business advises and invests for a wide range of successful people, charities and foundations. Wealth preservation is what we do best, with an investment approach that helps us to smooth returns and dampen risk across the market cycle.

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