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Market Turmoil: The Value of Staying the Course

Following five years of above-average returns, the S&P 500 has witnessed losses in 10 of the last 16 months dating to June 2007 while volatility, fueled by factors such as the sub-prime mortgage crisis, declining home prices, failing banks, commodity prices, has been high. These are real issues that impact everyone in some form or capacity.

During the aforementioned period of out-performance, the S&P 500 earned an average annual return of 12.8%, or about 2% more than the long-term average. But through September 30, 2008, returns have been battered by the poor performance of financial stocks (-31%), telecommunication services (-32%) and losses from industrials, materials, utilities, and information technology; which have each lost at least 20%.

Normally, the fixed income market tends to offer good diversification in times of stock market downturns. However, the Lehman Brothers Aggregate Bond Index has only returned around 0.64% in 2008 (as of 9/30/08). Treasuries, considered a safe haven during high volatility or tight credit conditions, have performed better and are up roughly 9% for the 12 months ended September 30, 2008.

Since 1950, the S&P 500 has lost at least 20% from the peak to the bottom of the market eight times; three in the 1970s and two each in the 1980s and 1990s. Prior to 2007, the last major bear market occurred with the S&P 500 declined 49% from the peak on March 24, 2000 to the bottom on March 11, 2003. The S&P 500 had several false rallies before it finally found that bottom and started to recover. In the first three months after the bottom, the S&P 500 had rebounded nearly 25%. Notably, investors on the sidelines in those first few months of recovery missed a dramatic increase in the market.

Most recently, the S&P 500 peaked on October 9, 2007 at 1,565.16 and reached a new low as of this writing of 996.0 on October 7, 2008, a drop of about 36% (excluding dividend reinvestment). Based on studies performed by Raymond James AMS Institutional Research, when there has been a major correction in the market (defined as greater than a 10% loss in the S&P 500 from top to bottom), the average loss has been 21%. In the 12 months that have followed that bottom, the average recovery has been 34%; 50% in the first 24 months.

As the table below illustrates, missing the best days in the markets can have a major impact on an investor's long-term portfolio performance.

The Penalty for Missing the Market		
S&P 500 Index: 12/31/1987 through 12/31/2007		
Investment Pattern Over a 20 Year Period	Average Annual Returns	Growth of \$10,000
Fully Invested	11.82%	\$ 93,339
Miss 10 best days	9.17%	\$ 57,778
Miss 20 best days	7.10%	\$ 39,398
Miss 30 best days	5.26%	\$ 27,886

Source: Interactive Data Systems (IDS). Based on the Daily Total Return of the Standard and Poor's 500 Index, including dividend reinvestment.

In this 20-year period, missing the 10 best of the 5,113 total trading days would have been detrimental. If an investor cannot time the market, why try?

Statistically, predicting the market's peak is extremely difficult. Likewise, predicting the bottom is just as difficult. The chances of predicting both are exponentially more improbable.

So, what should be done? For starters, it is in times like these that investors should ensure they are appropriately diversified with a strategy that makes long-term sense for their needs. Additionally, as long as their investment plan is still aligned with their investment needs, risk tolerance, and time horizon, investors should stick with it. The markets have always seen volatility on the up side and on the down side. While nothing is guaranteed, history has shown that those investors who stick with their well-diversified investment plans often end up with better returns than those investors who try to time the market.

As the old saying goes, it is not "timing the market," but "time in the market."

The S&P 500 is based on the average performance of 500 widely held common stocks. The S&P 500 is a broad-based measurement of changes in stock market conditions.

The Lehman Brothers Aggregate Bond Index includes fixed rate debt issues rated investment grade or higher by Moody's Investors Service, Standard and Poor's, or Fitch Investor's Service, in that order. All issues must have at least 1 year left to maturity and have an outstanding par value of at least \$100 million. The Aggregate Index is comprised of the Government/Corporate, the Mortgage-Backed Securities, and the Asset-Backed Securities indices.

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* Past results are not indicative of future performance. No strategy is guaranteed to be successful. Investing involves risk, and you may incur a profit or a loss.

** The Index is unmanaged and one cannot invest directly in an index.