Modern American Advisor

EMPOWERING. ELEVATING. EXCELLING.

OCTOBER 2026

FINANCE • CULTURE • FREEDOM



BREAKING THE IRON CAGE

Max Weber and the meaning of independence.

INDEPENDENCE IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

The Independence Issue

Building a firm on your own terms.

SCALE WITHOUT LOSING PURPOSE

Peter McGratty on the independent channel.

FREEDOM TO OPERATE

Ola Abdul on the infrastructure behind independence.

FROM WIREHOUSE TO RIA

Dr Sarah McLaughlin on the human side of a breakaway.

In this issue

The people. The ideas. What they mean for your practice.



Your independent future

Alex Sullivan

Why taking control is only the beginning—and why the right support matters throughout the life of your firm.

05



The advisor briefing

Ken Boyd

Jobs, bonds, AI and equity income: seven compact stories explain what changing markets could mean for client portfolios.

06



Competence. Consequences.

Justin Burse

Two compliance columns examine the gap between confidence and capability, and the risks hidden in getting what you wish for.

11



Service that scales

Ana M. Marques

What wealth firms can learn from Ritz-Carlton about giving people the responsibility and judgment to deliver exceptional service.

14



The advisor who says no

Derrick Kinney

Clear boundaries can deepen trust. A practical look at the conversations that help advisors serve the right clients well.

18



A burger and human behavior

Dr Sarah McLaughlin

An everyday purchase offers a lens on choice, identity and the forces shaping how clients think and behave.

22



Lessons from the gold rush

Michael Joseph, CFA

Capital discipline, balance sheets and the last boom: what has changed for gold miners, and have investors noticed?

24



The biscuit that built an empire

Ana M. Marques

How a Belgian biscuit became a global business—and what its unexpected partnerships can teach advisory firms about growth.

29



Why personalization remains elusive

F2 Strategy

Traditionally, advisors' client experiences were measured only against the experiences offered by other wealth management firms.

40



AI's evolution

Parker Ence

Beyond individual tools: why a shared context layer could change how AI understands and supports an advisory business.



Humanity Labs & independence

Dimple Shah

Humanity Labs' Dimple Shah discusses workflows, operational capacity and where AI could support the work behind advice.

73



Must-haves for sellers

Peter Saalfield

Growth, succession and sale readiness: the business qualities that can matter when an advisor prepares to find a buyer.

38

Independence & beyond

Building a firm on your own terms—and enjoying what follows.



Women in Finance

Caroline Holt

Caroline Holt's Reset & Refocus recap, alongside Kimberly Papedis' personal story of building an independent RIA business.

45



A closer CPA conversation

Ken Boyd

Why closer relationships between advisors and CPAs matter, plus the planned conversation on quality-management readiness.

54



Drive and tools to go independent

Ken Boyd

A practical framing for the decision to go independent and the support needed to build the business that follows.

56



From Wirehouse to RIA

Dr Sarah McLaughlin

The human side of a breakaway: professional identity, belonging and the transition from institutional role to business owner.

58



The freedom that matters

Michael Willgrass

What independence means when the business must create its own opportunities and take responsibility for its next stage.

62



Scale without losing purpose

Peter McGratty

Is the independent channel rebuilding what it left behind? A challenge to preserve purpose as firms gain scale.

66



Beyond the finish line

Ola Abdul

Operating freedom depends on what sits behind the advisor. Why infrastructure continues to matter long after launch.

70



Marketing with autonomy

Ken Boyd

Matt Ackermann and Becca Zophin explain the marketing support and relationships behind an advisor's move to independence.

79



Aline Wealth

Aline Wealth

Modern American Advisor interviewed Peter J. Klein and Mark Kravietz, the co-founders of Aline Wealth, about education, specialization and their fiduciary business.

86



Ira Ravitz

Ira Ravitz

Ira Ravitz explains why leaving the wirehouse enabled a more flexible, client-first approach to serving families through a personal CFO model.



Support for the next stage

Kathryn Ficarra

People, expertise and opportunities: how the Private Members Club is intended to support the business beyond its launch.

91



Life & Style: fountain pens, Dallas & Tiffany

Kathryn Ficarra

Six distinctive writing instruments for the meeting, the notebook and the signature that matters, plus Dallas and Tiffany's.

93

VANTREL
ETFs

A world of possibility.
One portfolio.



Explore a broader investment perspective.

FICTIONAL BRAND • DESIGN PROOF ONLY



ALEX SULLIVAN
Founder & CEO
alex.sullivan@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/alex-sullivan-3624154/

CEO WELCOME

Your independent future

Building on your own terms



Going independent means taking ownership of the business behind your advice. For many advisors, the attraction is clear: greater control over the clients they serve, the services they offer and the value they build. It is also a personal decision about what they want their working life to become.

That is why independence remains such an important milestone in our industry. It raises questions about who controls the client relationship and how an advisory firm should be run. Those questions remain relevant long after the new name goes above the door.

The opportunity comes with responsibility. Clients may not move, revenue can be interrupted and the cost of replacing an institution's infrastructure can be underestimated. Decisions about technology, staffing, compliance and cash flow now sit with the founder, alongside the daily work of advising clients.

The work continues as the firm grows. A successful launch does not automatically produce a dependable flow of new clients or a business that can function without its founder. Building a recognizable brand, hiring well and delivering a consistent client experience require sustained attention. So do succession and continuity.

Choosing the right support is therefore one of the most consequential decisions an independent advisor makes. The test is whether those relationships serve the business you want to create.

This issue examines that continuing journey: the change in professional identity that accompanies a breakaway, ownership of growth, the infrastructure that makes independence workable, and the succession and continuity questions behind every firm's next chapter.

At Modern American Advisor, we want to connect those ideas with practical help. We are bringing these opportunities together under one brand, the Private Members Club, to help you build your business as your needs change.

That includes lead generation through our work with Alynd, Operating for Scale with Ana M. Marques, and client conversations and organic growth with Derrick Kinney. Presence by Design with Kathryn Ficarra supports personal presence and brand development, while Empowering Women in Finance with Caroline Holt focuses on women's leadership and influence. MAA Talent focuses on recruitment, helping firms find the people they need as they grow.

MAA Advisor Intelligence and PlayVerto bring research into those business decisions. The aim is to make relevant expertise and useful relationships easier to find, whether you are preparing to launch, strengthening an established practice or planning its next chapter.

Independence gives you the freedom to decide what your firm can become. Building it takes continuing judgment and the right people around you. I hope this issue helps you think clearly about the business you want to build and the support that will help you get there.

Alex Sullivan
Founder & CEO | LinkedIn

For Daisy and Poppy. May you always remain independent and free-thinking.


KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
ken.boyd@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/ken-boyd-28616317/



When weaker jobs change the conversation



ADVISOR BRIEF

A cooling labor market can send conflicting signals to investors. Slower hiring may weaken household income and spending, putting pressure on corporate earnings. At the same time, it can reduce expectations that the Federal Reserve will raise interest rates to contain inflation. Stocks can therefore rise on news that appears, at first glance, to be bad for the economy.

For advisors, the important distinction is between a market reaction to the outlook for earnings and a reaction to the outlook for monetary policy. Interest rates affect borrowing costs, the relative appeal of bonds and cash, and the value investors place on future corporate cash flows. Growth-oriented equities can be particularly sensitive because more of their perceived value depends on earnings expected further into the future.

That does not make a weaker jobs report a dependable bullish signal. A modest cooling in employment may ease wage pressure without undermining the economy. A sharper deterioration can lead investors to focus instead on declining consumer demand and weaker profits. The same headline can have a different meaning at different points in the cycle.

Inflation remains the other half of the calculation. Softer employment combined with moderating inflation can support expectations of stable or lower rates. Weakening employment alongside stubborn inflation presents a more difficult policy choice and can create volatility across both stocks and bonds.

One monthly release cannot establish which scenario is unfolding. Advisors should consider the trend in hiring alongside inflation, earnings and the expectations already reflected in market prices. A favorable one-day response is not, by itself, a durable investment thesis.

The client conversation should begin with the portfolio's purpose. For someone drawing an income, liquidity and the timing of withdrawals may matter more than the immediate equity-market response. For a long-term investor, concentration and sensitivity to rate expectations may deserve more attention. The useful question is how the changing economic picture affects the risks a client already owns, rather than whether a single report is simply good or bad.

BY KEN BOYD / EDITED FOR THIS ISSUE



KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
ken.boyd@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/ken-boyd-28616317/





Short Treasuries, clear purpose

Short-term Treasurys can serve several purposes: liquidity, capital preservation, income and a temporary home for money awaiting deployment. Advisors should begin with the client's timetable rather than a prediction about the next move in yields.

A two-year note is less sensitive to changes in interest rates than a long-term Treasury. If held to maturity, it pays the promised principal and coupons, assuming the U.S. government meets its obligations. Its market value can still fluctuate before then, so an investor who needs to sell early may receive less than expected.

High government credit quality does not remove every risk. Inflation can erode purchasing power. When a security matures, the proceeds may have to be reinvested at a lower yield. A decision to stay short can also mean giving up the potential price gains that longer-duration bonds could deliver if yields fall.

Match maturities to foreseeable liabilities and separate money needed soon from assets intended for longer-term growth. An attractive quoted yield should prompt a conversation about purpose, duration and reinvestment. The most useful question may be how much interest-rate risk the client needs to own to achieve their objectives, rather than where Treasury yields will go next.



AI enthusiasm and the lessons of history

A technology can transform the economy while the securities associated with it become overvalued. The internet did change business, but investors accelerated the timetable on which its benefits would justify the capital being committed. That distinction matters in today's enthusiasm for artificial intelligence.

AI can improve productivity and create new businesses without making every investment in the sector attractive. Advisors should examine how much future success current valuations already require, including assumptions about growth, margins and the time needed to generate cash.

Booms can become vulnerable when they depend on a continuing supply of new capital. Companies may finance losses and industries may build capacity while investors believe future cash flows will justify current spending. Conditions change when lenders or shareholders become less willing to provide that funding.

The practical response is to examine concentration, leverage and the portfolio's dependence on optimistic assumptions. Diversification cannot eliminate losses, but it can reduce reliance on one company, theme or outcome. Client conversations should distinguish confidence in a technology's long-term importance from confidence in a security's current price. The question is not merely whether AI is real, but what investors are paying for the benefits they expect.

BY KEN BOYD / EDITED FOR THIS ISSUE



KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
ken.boyd@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/ken-boyd-28616317/





Look beneath an active bond fund's yield

ADVISOR BRIEF

An active bond fund can outperform its benchmark because its manager made good decisions. It can also outperform because it took risks the benchmark does not contain. Advisors need to understand the difference before presenting excess return as evidence of skill.

The Bloomberg U.S. Aggregate Bond Index is a widely used reference for a broad investment-grade U.S. bond portfolio. It was not designed to represent every fixed-income strategy. A portfolio containing high-yield debt, bank loans or other exposures outside the index can have a fundamentally different risk profile.

Start with the comparison itself. Does the benchmark resemble what the manager owns? If it does not, a favorable performance gap may tell the client less than a comparison with funds taking similar risks. A benchmark label should never replace an examination of the holdings and mandate.

Then separate the sources of return. Longer duration can help when yields fall and hurt when they rise. Lower-rated credit can earn higher coupons while exposing investors to wider spreads, defaults and weaker liquidity. Sector concentration and less liquid holdings can also contribute to performance in ways that become uncomfortable during stress.

A higher distribution yield is not necessarily a higher-quality income stream. Examine credit ratings, maturity structure, duration, issuer concentration and liquidity, together with the flexibility the manager has to change those exposures. The fund's intended role in the client's portfolio should guide the assessment.

Higher yields can make fixed income more useful, but they do not make recent results a reliable guide to future experience. Historical outperformance alone cannot establish whether investors were rewarded for skill or for accepting additional risk. The strongest client explanation connects the return to its source, describes what could reverse it and makes clear why that risk belongs in the portfolio.

BY KEN BOYD / EDITED FOR THIS ISSUE



KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
ken.boyd@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/ken-boyd-28616317/





Private equity in a costlier financing environment

Higher financing costs can change the economics of private equity well beyond the interest bill. They affect the businesses being acquired, the capacity of prospective buyers and the timing and value of eventual exits.

Companies with floating-rate debt may have to direct more cash toward servicing borrowing rather than investing in operations. Refinancing can become more expensive, while buyers facing the same financing conditions may be less willing or able to pay earlier valuation multiples.

That creates a mismatch when sellers still expect yesterday's prices. A manager may need to hold an investment for longer, improve its operating performance or accept a different exit outcome. Private equity is a long-duration commitment whose liquidity, valuation and return profile depend partly on the availability and cost of credit.

Advisors should distinguish value created by operating improvements from returns that rely on favorable borrowing terms or expanding exit multiples. Debt structure, refinancing dates and the resilience of cash flows deserve scrutiny alongside the business story.

The client's capacity to remain invested matters too. Review liquidity needs and commitments against the possibility of a longer holding period. An attractive opportunity must still fit the investor's ability to fund it and wait for an exit.



Corporate bonds: two risks behind one yield

Corporate bond yields compensate investors for more than the passage of time. They reflect interest-rate exposure and the possibility that an issuer encounters financial difficulty. Those risks can move independently.

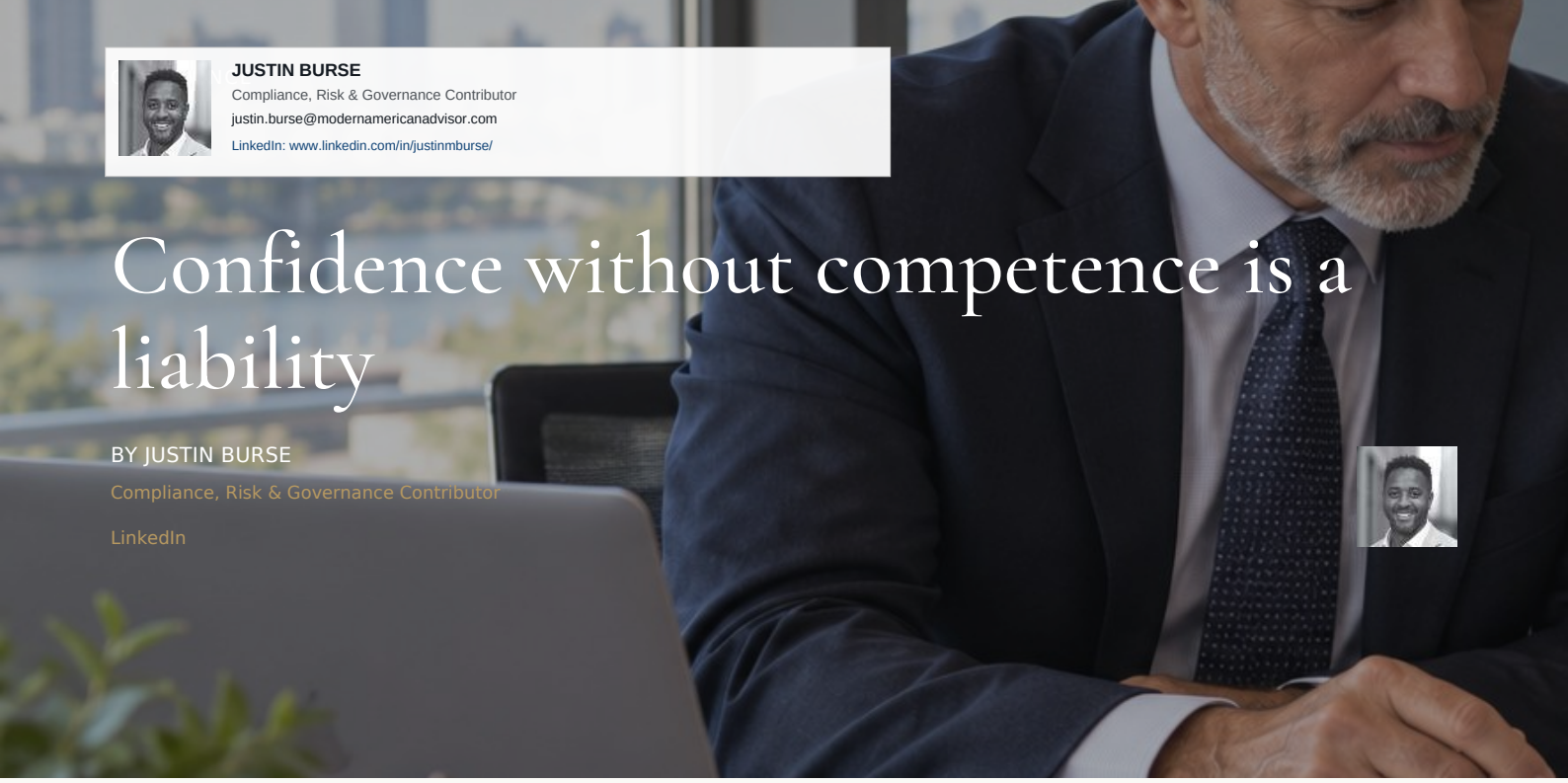
When market interest rates rise, the prices of existing bonds generally fall as newly issued securities offer more attractive yields. Longer-duration holdings are more sensitive. At the same time, concerns about corporate balance sheets or defaults can widen credit spreads, reducing prices even if Treasury yields do not change.

A portfolio therefore does not need widespread defaults to experience meaningful losses. A repricing of credit risk can be enough, particularly when investors become less willing to own lower-quality or less liquid securities.

Before selecting a higher-yielding bond or fund, examine duration, issuer quality, diversification and liquidity. Ask how the exposure would behave if rates increased, spreads widened, or both happened together.

The intended portfolio role is central. Money held to meet dependable near-term spending needs may require a different risk profile from an allocation selected for long-term income. Explain the source of the yield before deciding how much of it a client should own. The headline number is the beginning of the analysis, not the conclusion.

BY KEN BOYD / EDITED FOR THIS ISSUE

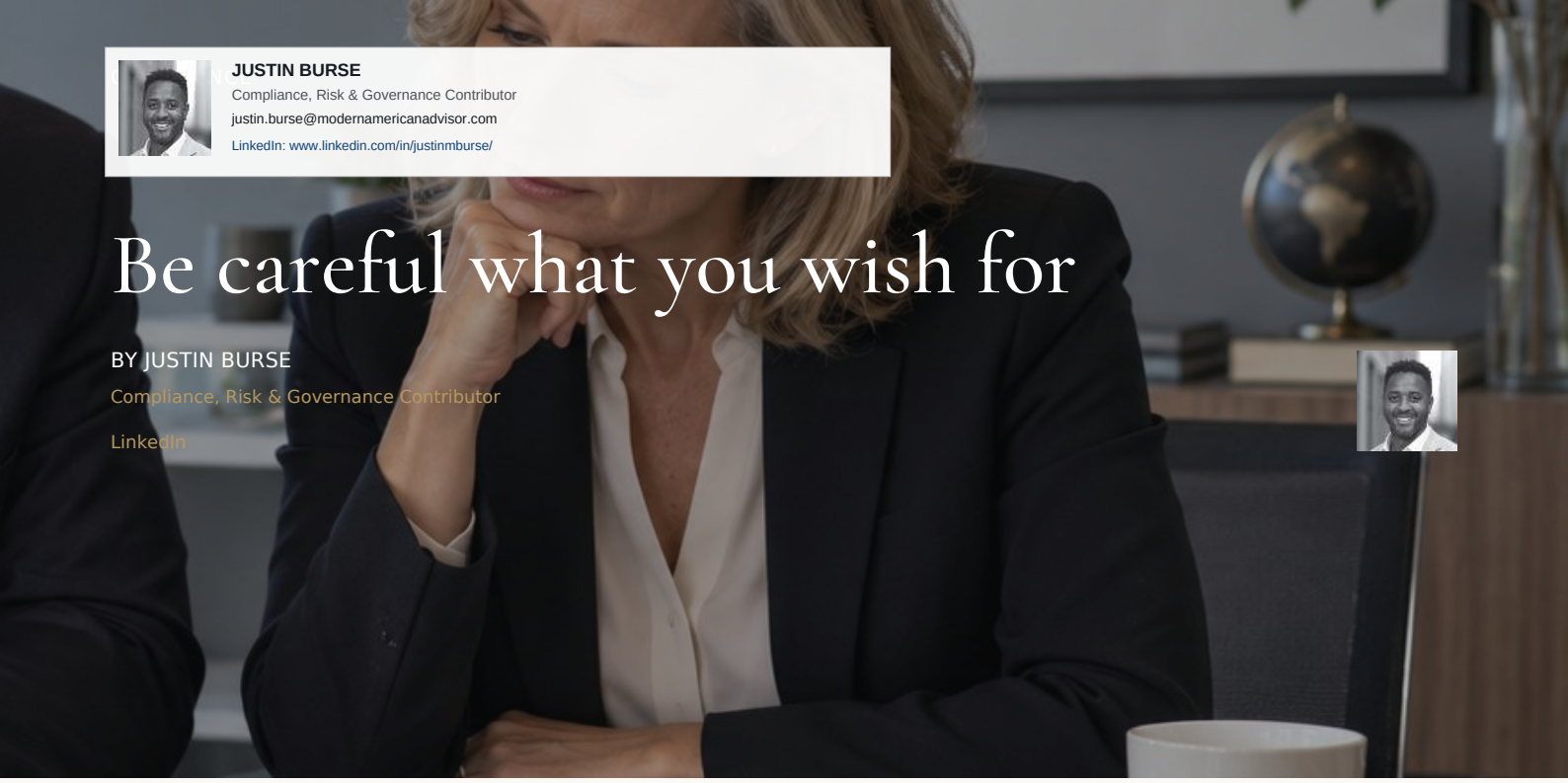


JUSTIN BURSE
Compliance, Risk & Governance Contributor
justin.burse@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/justinmburse/

Confidence without competence is a liability

BY JUSTIN BURSE
Compliance, Risk & Governance Contributor
LinkedIn

Every top adviser that I have come across in my time in the industry has had the same personal trait: unshakable confidence. (One in particular claimed that he can teach me compliance!) I'm a bit similar when it comes to soccer. In my head, I can still do it all even against kids half my age. That confidence has served me well in my soccer career, just as it has served many of the advisers I've encountered throughout my time in the industry. Confidence can be an important quality in this business. Clients want to know that the person advising them has a plan, understands the markets and can make decisions when circumstances become difficult. But there is a point where confidence can become a weakness. Advisers are bound by their fiduciary duty. The duties of loyalty and care. The duty of care requires the adviser to provide prudent and informed advice to clients. I believe we are entering a period of significant change in investing where one of the most valuable traits an adviser can demonstrate is the willingness to say, "I don't know." Clients are asking advisers increasingly difficult questions about investment products and strategies that may fall outside their traditional areas of expertise. Crypto. Prediction markets. Alternative investments. New investment structures and products seem to be appearing almost daily. Some advisers have spent years developing deep expertise in traditional stocks, bonds, mutual funds and portfolio construction, but that does not necessarily translate to a knowledge base to evaluate every new asset class that comes across their desk. Remember the average age of the US financial adviser is 56. When an adviser does not have enough knowledge to make an informed decision about a particular asset class or investment, he or she should say so. That can be difficult for successful advisers. Confidence is often part of what got them there in the first place. The same conviction that allows an adviser to stay disciplined during a market selloff can also create a tendency to believe that he or she can figure out any investment given enough time. But advisers must recognize the limits of their own knowledge. This is particularly important in uncertain economic times, like we are in now. Economic uncertainty has a way of exposing weaknesses that may remain hidden during the "good times." Investment processes get tested. Compliance procedures get tested. Risk-management systems get tested. And perhaps most importantly, the prudent and informed advice of advisers get tested. What's that famous Warren Buffet quote?... "Only when the tide goes out do you discover who's been swimming naked." The best advisers understand that being confident does not mean having all the answers. It means being confident enough to recognize when you don't have an answer. That may be one of the most important distinctions between confidence and competence. In an industry experiencing this much change, that kind of humility may not be a weakness at all. It may be one of an adviser's greatest strengths.



JUSTIN BURSE
Compliance, Risk & Governance Contributor
justin.burse@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/justinmburse/

Be careful what you wish for

BY JUSTIN BURSE
Compliance, Risk & Governance Contributor
LinkedIn

After returning to industry, I can truly say that the constant changing in regulatory enforcement posture between administrations is one of the most frustrating aspects of being in compliance. One chairperson of the SEC has a hands-off approach, and another might have a "broken windows" approach. This leads to constant whiplash when one practice might be deemed ok one day and punishable with an enforcement action the next. I will leave the philosophical debate over whether that is a good or bad thing to the academics. For the compliance professionals, we must "crack on," as the Brits would say. At the start of Commissioner Atkins tenure, he made clear the new enforcement approach under his purview would be fewer cases brought for the sake of enforcement statistics, and more cases aimed squarely at investor harm. While I don't believe cases previously were brought purely for enforcement statics, a focus on investor harm and not technical violations sounds familiar to a regulatory approach I have heard before. Over the last year, the SEC has taken enforcement actions centered around the adviser's fiduciary duties, more importantly, the adviser's duty of loyalty. Disclosing and/or choosing not to disclose an arrangement or practice could lead to a breach of an adviser's duty of loyalty. The duty of loyalty ties in when an adviser does not put the client's interest first or disclose to the client that the adviser has a conflict of interest that might lead to the adviser to not put the client first. In those instances, Advisers need to disclose the conflicts to put clients on notice. The crux of many of the cases brought by the SEC over the past year can be summarized as: An adviser can have a disclosure on paper and still have a problem if the disclosure is contradicted elsewhere. Form ADV, Form CRS, websites, client communications, scripts and actual compensation practices need to tell the same story. For compliance professionals, that suggests a useful exercise: Rather than reviewing disclosures document-by-document, map material conflict across the entire client experience. What does the ADV say? What does Form CRS say? What does the website say? What does the representative tell the client? The practical takeaway from the SEC focus on disclosure related to the adviser's fiduciary duties is that advisers should not limit their annual conflict review to the conflicts that are easiest to identify. A conflict-management program is only as strong as the connection between the firm's disclosures, incentives, supervision and actual business practices. The new enforcement playbook may be narrower than the one that preceded it. But for advisers, it could also be more consequential when it comes to proper disclosure.



ANA M. MARQUES
Contributor
ana.marques@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: uk.linkedin.com/in/ana-m-marques

From Ritz-Carlton to RIAs

What exceptional service can teach an advisory firm about responsibility, judgment and scale.

BY ANA M. MARQUES

Fractional COO and founder of Alignis Global

LinkedIn



EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION

ANA M. MARQUES

From Ritz-Carlton to RIAs

At the Ritz-Carlton, any employee, from the general manager to the janitor, can spend up to $2,000 per guest to resolve a problem or rescue an experience, without asking a manager first. [1] No form, no escalation, no waiting. The authority belongs to whoever is standing in front of the problem.

People hear that and fixate on the money. They picture a budget line, a license to get champagne and free nights, and they quietly conclude it is a nice idea for a luxury hotel and irrelevant to a firm running other people's retirements.

That is the wrong lesson, because the right lesson is the single most useful thing I know about scaling an advisory firm.

It was never about the $2,000

The first tell is that the money is barely spent. Ritz-Carlton staff rarely come close to the limit, and the company found long ago that people entrusted with real authority tend to be more careful with it, not less. [2]

The founder who built that culture, Horst Schulze, did not arrive at the figure through generosity. He arrived at it through the arithmetic of a guest relationship worth a quarter of a million dollars over a lifetime, and the recognition that a problem solved in thirty seconds by an empowered employee becomes a thirty-minute ordeal the moment it has to climb a chain of command. [2][3] By the time the manager arrives, the guest has already written the review.

So, the $2,000 is not a spending rule. It is a decision rule. It says: the person closest to the client is trusted to act, and the organisation has done the work up front to make that trust safe.

Now hold that next to how most advisory firms actually operate, and the gap is uncomfortable.

Firms delegate tasks. They hoard decisions.

When I ask a founder what they have delegated, they list tasks. The paraplanning, the report packs, the diary, the client onboarding admin. Genuinely, most small and mid-sized firm owners have learned to hand work off, and they are proud of it.

Then I ask a different question. What decisions can somebody make in this firm without checking with you first, and the room goes quiet.

This is the real bottleneck, and it is the one almost nobody sees. In the interview that prompted this column I put it plainly: the biggest constraint in a growing firm is not tasks, it is decisions queued behind the founder. People have the work, they simply do not have the authority, so they wait, and every wait is a small tax on turnaround, autonomy and ownership.

A firm can automate its entire workflow and still move at the speed of one person's inbox, because the process keeps stopping at the point where a judgement is required and only one judgement is allowed to count.

Why founders hold on

Part of this is structural, and part of it is human, and the human part is the one people are reluctant to name.

Founders like to be needed. Being the person every decision flows through feels like importance, and for years it genuinely was the job. But the instinct that built the practice is the same instinct that caps it, and I have watched perfectly good firms stall on nothing more complicated than an owner's quiet reluctance to become dispensable.

Here is the reframe I offer them. If the business cannot make a decision without you, you have not built a business, you have built a job with unusually good revenue. An enterprise is precisely the thing that keeps working when its founder walks out of the room.

None of this shows up in the numbers, which is what makes it dangerous. The P&L looks healthy, the AUM keeps climbing, and in a recurring-revenue model the money arrives whether or not the operation underneath is sound, so operations become the last thing anyone examines. The strain sits behind the curtain for a year or more before a client ever feels a slower response or a delayed review.

ANA M. MARQUES

From Ritz-Carlton to RIAs

The decision tree comes before the manual

The standard response to all this is to write a procedures manual. A thick binder of processes, an SOP for everything, order imposed at last.

I would do something else first. Before the manual, build the decision tree, because a process that tells people how to do a thing is close to useless if it does not also tell them who is allowed to decide it.

A procedures manual without delegated authority becomes a folder nobody opens. People still have to ask, the questions still funnel upward, and you have documented the bottleneck rather than removed it. Map the decisions first, assign each one to a role with the accountability that matches it, and the manual finally has somewhere to land.

That is the Ritz-Carlton lesson translated into a wealth firm. Not a $2,000 pot, but a clear answer to the question every employee should be able to answer instantly: what am I trusted to decide on my own.

Be deliberate about who you actually serve

There is a second half to the Ritz story that firms skip, and it is the one about knowing your guest.

Empowerment only works because the whole organization shares a precise understanding of who it is for and what a good experience looks like. In advisory firms that clarity is usually vague, and vague is expensive, because you cannot design a consistent experience for a client you have only loosely defined.

Being intentional about your client base is not a marketing nicety; it is an operating decision. If the community you serve rallies around the local basketball team, sponsor it and show up, because presence in the places your clients already gather does more than any brochure. If more than 40% of the people in your region attend church every week, then their values are not a demographic footnote, they run through how they think about money, legacy and risk, and your service has to hold those same values consistently across every adviser they meet, not just the founder who first won their trust.

The firms I see win are almost never the widest. They are the ones with the nerve to be specific, because specificity is what lets you standardise the experience behind the scenes while keeping it personal in front of the client.

Human and high performing are not a trade-off

There is a fear that all this structure squeezes the humanity out of a firm. I understand it, and I think it has the relationship backwards.

Culture is easy to feel in a firm of fifteen, because the founder is close enough to set it by example every day. Somewhere between thirty and fifty people that intimacy thins, heads of department start setting their own weather, and the thing that made the firm special leaks away unless somebody made it deliberate.

Japan is the example I reach for. It runs on some of the most efficient systems in the world, and yet the interaction, the courtesy, the human relationship is not left to chance, it is treated as something to protect on purpose. Efficiency and warmth are not opponents. What breaks under growth is only the warmth nobody bothered to design.

Succession is the decision you delegate to the future

The longest-range version of letting go is succession, and it is where the cost of hoarding decisions eventually comes due.

The arithmetic is not gentle. Cerulli's latest advisor research finds around 35% of US advisers, holding roughly 40% of industry assets and some $14.5 trillion, expect to retire within a decade, and more than a quarter of them still have no clear succession plan. [4] Advisers aged 55 and over already manage well over half of all assets. [5] When an adviser retires, roughly a third of their clients move firms. [6]

The firms that navigate this are the ones with a genuine spread of ages and a deliberate

ANA M. MARQUES

From Ritz-Carlton to RIAs

handover of experience, not a cliff edge of senior partners followed by a gap. The offshore law firm Maples Group manages it by enforcing partner retirement, which sounds ruthless and is actually generous, because it guarantees a conveyor belt of successors who absorb the values and the judgement on the way up. You cannot transfer a relationship, or a way of deciding, in the fortnight before someone leaves.

This is the same problem as the $2,000 rule, stretched across decades. Either judgement lives in one person, or it has been deliberately distributed so the firm survives that person.

Where COMPASS comes in

This is the work my COMPASS framework is built to make visible, across seven pillars:

Clarity of purpose

Operating plan

Members

Protection

Attractive proposition and pricing

Story

Systems.

Decision authority, client definition, culture and succession are not soft extras in that model, they sit inside Members, Clarity and Systems, and they are usually where the ceiling actually is.

The Scale Readiness Scorecard is the quick version, a short diagnostic that shows a founder which pillar is capping the rest. The COMPASS Audit is the deep version, scoring each pillar against a five-level maturity scale from Founder-Dependent to Built to Scale, using document review, management information, process walkthroughs and interviews rather than a self-assessment form, because how leadership believes the firm behaves and how it actually behaves are two different data sets, and the gap between them is usually the finding.

The output is not a transformation program. It is a prioritized sense of which two or three decisions, roles or handoffs to fix first, and in what order.

The question worth sitting with

If you stepped away for a week, what would break, and who would call you. Now stretch it to a month, then to a quarter, and watch how quickly the answer stops being reassuring. A firm that survives your week but not your quarter is telling you exactly where the decisions are trapped.

Whatever it is that would make someone reach for the phone while you are away, that is not an interruption to be managed. That is the next thing to delegate, and the Ritz-Carlton worked out forty years ago that the fix was never the money. It was the authority.

Sources

[1] The Ritz-Carlton's Famous $2,000 Rule, Customers That Stick, 2025. https://customersthatstick.com/blog/the-ritz-carltons-famous-2000-rule/

[2] Micah Solomon, The New Gold Standard, on Ritz-Carlton employee empowerment and guest lifetime value. https://resources.northwoods.church/wp-content/uploads/The_New_Gold_Standard.pdf

[3] Horst Schulze, Excellence Wins (Ritz-Carlton co-founder), on judgement, empowerment and the "Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen" principle.

[4] Cerulli Associates, The Cerulli Edge, U.S. Advisor Edition, 3Q 2026, adviser retirement and succession data. https://www.planadviser.com/adviser-recruitment-development-gain-importance-as-retirements-rise/

[4] Cerulli Associates, adviser age and asset concentration (advisers 55+ managing the majority of assets). https://www.cerulli.com/press-releases/40-of-advisory-assets-will-transition-in-10-years-according-to-cerulli



DERRICK KINNEY
Contributor
derrick.kinney@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/derrickkinney/

The advisor who says no

Why the right boundaries can help high-net-worth clients say yes.

BY DERRICK KINNEY

Podcast Host & Growth Performance Editor

LinkedIn



EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION

DERRICK KINNEY

The advisor who says no

High-net-worth clients already have plenty of people willing to tell them what they want to hear. The advisor in short supply is the one willing to tell them what they need to hear.

Most financial advisors make a fatal mistake when sitting across from a high-net-worth prospect.

They try to woo them.

They compliment them, agree with them and admire what they've accomplished. Without realizing it, they begin acting more like a fan than an advisor.

I understand why. You want the business. You want them to like you. And when someone has millions of dollars they could potentially entrust to you, disagreeing with them can feel risky.

But I've found the opposite is true.

High-net-worth clients don't need another "yes" person. They probably already have plenty of those.

Successful people are often surrounded by people who have a reason to keep them happy. Employees, vendors, business partners, friends, family members and sometimes even advisors.

What's in short supply, but high demand?

Someone willing to tell them the truth.

That's why one of the most powerful ways to position yourself with a high-net-worth prospect is to tell them:

"If you want an advisor who will always agree with you, I'm not the right choice. I'm going to tell you no sometimes. You may even dislike me at times. But my job is to protect you, help you make more money and tell you the truth because I have your best interest at heart."

You're no longer auditioning for the job. You're defining the job.

We've found that this type of dialogue can result in upwards of a 90% conversion rate with high-net-worth prospects.

Why?

They don't need another fan. They need a voice of truth.

One "No" Was Worth $1 Million

One of my clients, Dave, got fired.

Understandably, he was angry and emotional. And he wanted to sell his company stock.

I told him, "No. Don't sell the stock."

My job in that moment wasn't to agree with Dave. It was to keep an emotional event from triggering an emotional financial decision.

He listened.

And because he didn't sell the stock when he wanted to, that decision ultimately made him an additional $1 million.

Think about that.

One "no" was worth $1 million.

Sometimes the greatest value you provide as an advisor isn't what you tell a client to do. It's what you stop them from doing.

Don't Buy the RV. Rent One First.

Another client had a retirement dream: Buy an RV and hit the road.

Financially, they could afford it. It would have been easy for me to say yes and start figuring out where the money should come from.

DERRICK KINNEY

The advisor who says no

Instead, I asked, “Have you ever spent much time traveling in an RV?”

They hadn’t.

So I told them, “No. Don’t buy the RV. Rent one first.”

Sleep in it. Drive it. Park it. Live the dream before you buy the dream.

They did.

And they hated it.

They later thanked me for helping them avoid spending roughly $175,000 on an RV they almost certainly would have regretted.

The numbers said they could afford it. But being an advisor means going beyond whether the numbers work.

Just because your client can afford something doesn’t mean they should buy it.

Don’t Move Yet. Test-Drive It First.

Another couple came to me ready to sell their house and move closer to their kids and grandkids.

It sounded great.

But I asked them, “Have you ever spent an extended amount of time living close to your kids and grandkids?”

Not really.

So instead of cheering them on, I suggested something different.

“No. Don’t move yet. Test-drive it first.”

I suggested they rent a VRBO near their family for a month and experience what everyday life would actually feel like.

Experience an ordinary Tuesday instead of a vacation Saturday.

They did.

When they returned, they told me, “Derrick, you saved us from a very costly move.”

They loved their kids. They adored their grandkids. But they discovered that being that close every single day felt overwhelming.

Instead, they decided to get a second home in the area. They could visit regularly without completely uprooting the lifestyle they loved.

That’s what being the voice of reason looks like.

Good ideas should still be tested before they become expensive decisions.

Sometimes Your Client Needs You to Be the Bad Guy

One of my favorite examples involved a woman named Denise.

Denise won approximately $2 million in the lottery and was referred to me by a trusted CPA.

Suddenly, she had a problem she’d never had before.

People knew she had money.

And when people know you have money, they can develop some pretty creative ideas for what you should do with it.

Friends and family came knocking.

DERRICK KINNEY

The advisor who says no

That's difficult because saying no to a spreadsheet is easy. Saying no to someone you love is much harder.

So I gave Denise permission to make me the bad guy.

"No. You don't have to give them the money. Blame me."

If someone asked her for money and she didn't feel comfortable saying no, she could simply tell them, "My advisor told me I can't."

Perfect. I'll take the heat.

She loved it because it gave her breathing room. She didn't have to defend herself or feel guilty every time someone asked for money.

Sometimes your client needs to borrow your backbone.

Because an advisor's job isn't just protecting the portfolio. Sometimes it's protecting the person.

Stop Trying to Be Liked

This is where I think advisors need to change their mindset.

Stop trying so hard to be liked by wealthy prospects. Start showing them why you can be trusted.

Trust isn't built by agreeing with everything someone says. Sometimes trust is built the moment you're willing to respectfully disagree.

No. Don't sell yet.

No. Don't buy it yet.

No. Don't move yet.

No. You don't have to give them the money.

Let's slow down. Let's test it. Let's make sure today's emotional decision doesn't become tomorrow's expensive regret.

That's real value.

Your greatest win for a high-net-worth client may never appear on a performance report.

It may be the stock they didn't sell. The $175,000 RV they didn't buy. The house they didn't move out of. The money they didn't give away out of guilt.

High-net-worth clients already have plenty of people willing to tell them what they want to hear.

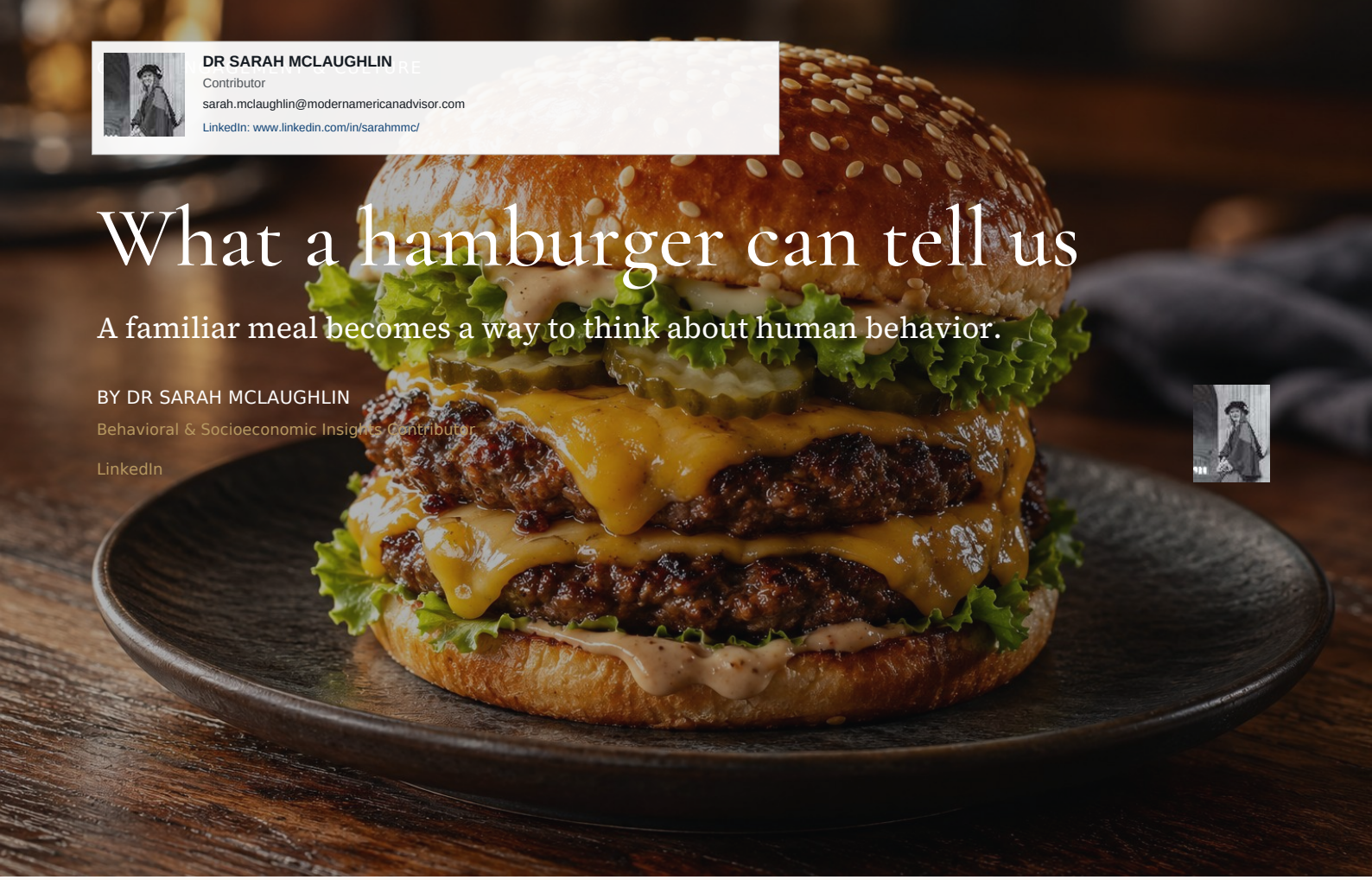
Be the person willing to tell them what they need to hear.

Because sometimes the most valuable word a financial advisor can say is "no."

Derrick Kinney is a business communication expert for financial advisors, a Wall Street Journal and USA Today bestselling author, and a former Forbes-ranked financial advisor.

Derrick Kinney • Keynote Speaker | Built, scaled & exited a Top 1% advisory firm • Teaching advisors and entrepreneurs how to attract $3M–$10M clients • WSJ & USA Today Bestselling Author | Client Conversation Expert Book Derrick to Speak → https://www.successforadvisors.com





DR SARAH MCLAUGHLIN
Contributor
sarah.mclaughlin@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/sarahmmc/

What a hamburger can tell us

A familiar meal becomes a way to think about human behavior.

BY DR SARAH MCLAUGHLIN

Behavioral & Socioeconomic Insights Contributor

LinkedIn

Dr Sarah McLaughlin

Why We Trust A Burger

As a university lecturer, I enjoy creating stories to help explain complex theories and ideas to my students. Metaphors and allegories are a great way for learners to relate to and apply new models or perspectives.

They can also help wealth advisors communicate complex ideas to their clients.

When it comes to behavioural economics, I am fascinated by the kinds of indicators that become influential because they capture people's imagination. The Big Mac Index, created by The Economist in 1986 (Our Big Mac index shows how burger prices differ across borders | The Economist), is one such example.

It uses the price of a McDonald's Big Mac1 around the world to illustrate the economic concept of purchasing-power parity (PPP). This is the idea that exchange rates reflect the relative cost of the same goods in different countries. (The index was updated in 2022 to use a McDonald's-provided price for the US).

As the Big Mac is sold in over 100 countries, with some cultural variations to its ingredients, it serves as a useful benchmark. Yet, the Index is more than a novel perspective on currencies.

It underscores an important aspect about how clients process information, which is a takeaway every advisor can use.

When the Economy Becomes Personal

The Big Mac Index shows how people make sense of complex economic systems.

Most people don't think in terms of economic models, but a burger gives an instant point of reference which helps translate an abstract discussion about global economics into something we can immediately understand. The success of the index is psychological, not just economic.

The latest Big Mac Index tells us that the U.S. dollar remains strong relative to many major currencies, but for financial advisors, the behavioral effects are especially interesting.

People rarely experience inflation rates as an economic concept. They experience them as the $10 airport sandwich or the $6 coffee that suddenly feels outrageous. The economy becomes real when it interrupts everyday routines.

Differences in burger prices offer a simple way to think about purchasing power and relative affordability. It is an example of framing, a concept well known in behavioural science, where the way information is presented influences how it is understood.

DR SARAH MCLAUGHLIN

What a hamburger can tell us

People are not being given different information about relative purchasing power, they are being given a different way to understand it. A table of currency data appeals to economists, but a burger appeals to almost everyone.

The frame turns an abstract economic concept into an everyday experience, making it easier to understand and discuss. By linking exchange rates to something familiar, the Big Mac Index transforms an abstract economic concept into an everyday experience.

We Don't Remember Exchange Rates

My son recently came home from a trip abroad. After recalling the amazing sites he saw and experiences he had, he went on to do exactly what the Big Mac Index predicts people will do. He listed the differences in the price he paid for a taxi ride from the airport, his hotel stay per night, and meals out compared to what he might pay at home.

His purchases became a mental exchange-rate calculation. A train ticket and a pint of beer became evidence of how affordable the country felt compared with home. He instinctively narrated his holiday through prices.

Without realising it, he was using consumption to make sense of another society. These are social judgements disguised as economic ones.

Prices Are Social Signals

The Big Mac Index reminds us that markets are social as well as financial systems.

We like to imagine prices are objective facts. Sociologists know they are also social signals. They communicate what a society values, what labor is worth, and what people accept as 'normal'.

Prices are shaped not only by exchange rates but also by wages, consumer behaviour, local costs and cultural factors. Looking at burger prices reveals broader differences in costs of living, and these tell us something about how societies are organised and what everyday life actually feels like in different countries.

From Burgers to Better Conversations

As a sociologist and an educator, I see the real value of 'Burgernomics' lies in making complex ideas accessible – or more 'digestible'!

Understanding global economics through the price of a burger is a crude way to compare economics, yet nearly 40 years after its creation, people still talk about it.

The Big Mac Index succeeds because people understand stories before they understand statistics. We tend to comprehend the world through familiar, everyday experiences rather than abstract theory. Everyday examples create stronger engagement than technical explanations

Understanding this can help advisors engage their clients because clients interpret markets best when complex ideas are linked to everyday experiences, or what clients know already.

The message for advisers isn't about burgers at all.

It's that clients rarely make financial decisions using spreadsheets alone. They make them using stories, memories and comparisons with everyday life. The advisers who understand that won't just explain markets better, they'll understand people better.

For me, however, the most interesting thing about the Big Mac Index isn't what it tells us about currencies, but what it tells us about people.

MODERN AMERICAN ADVISOR

SOCIETY, WEALTH & ADVICE CONTRIBUTORS PANEL

We are bringing together sociologists, social scientists and researchers to give socioeconomic issues a more thoughtful, evidence-led voice in financial advice and translate insight on inequality, opportunity, family, culture, work, ageing and social justice into practical conversations.
If you are interested in joining our exclusive contributors panel, please email our CEO, Alex.Sullivan@themodernamericanadvisor.com


MICHAEL JOSEPH, CFA
Contributor
michael.joseph@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/mjoseph1

Gold miners learned from the last boom

Did investors notice? A closer look at capital discipline, balance sheets and the lessons of the last cycle.

BY MICHAEL JOSEPH, CFA
Markets & Investment Strategy Editor
LinkedIn



Gold has fallen sharply from its highs, and gold-mining stocks have fallen even further. For longtime investors in the sector, the pattern may feel uncomfortably familiar.

When gold declines, miners have historically provided an amplified version of the pain. Their revenue falls with the metal price, while labor, fuel, equipment and other operating costs exacerbate the pressure on already shrinking margins.

It is understandable for investors to look at the latest sell-off and think: Here we go again.

But while gold miners remain volatile businesses, today's leading producers are entering this period from a much stronger position than they did at the beginning of the last major gold decline. Balance sheets are healthier, margins remain substantial and management teams appear far more focused on capital discipline.

That does not mean every gold miner is a bargain. It does mean selective investors can find opportunity where much of the market is expecting a repeat of the past.

Gold Still Has a Role to Play

There are valid reasons to believe gold prices could rise over time. Persistent inflation gradually erodes the purchasing power of paper currencies, while geopolitical uncertainty and concerns over government debt provide additional support for an asset that is no one else's liability.

Central banks have also remained significant buyers. According to the World Gold Council, they purchased 863 metric tons in 2025—well above the 2010-to-2021 annual average of 473 tons—and added another 244 tons during the first quarter of 2026.

At SAM, however, our belief that most investors should maintain some exposure to gold is not dependent on predicting where the metal trades next month or even next year.

We view gold as having several potential jobs within a portfolio:

A diversifier that may behave differently from stocks and bonds

A hedge against periods of geopolitical or financial chaos

A measure of protection against the long-term erosion of fiat currencies

Those roles can remain valuable even during periods when gold prices stagnate or decline. But deciding to own gold and deciding to own gold-mining stocks are two different decisions.

Gold is a metal. A gold miner is an operating business.

Why Gold Miners Earned Investors' Skepticism

The gold-mining industry's poor reputation has been deserved.

As gold soared during the years leading up to its 2011 peak, many mining companies assumed the favorable environment would continue. They

MICHAEL JOSEPH, CFA



borrowed heavily, pursued expensive acquisitions and approved marginal projects using optimistic commodity-price assumptions.

Management teams were frequently rewarded for increasing total production and reserves. Far less attention was paid to whether that growth improved value per share.

Then gold prices turned lower. The decline exposed inflated cost structures, weak balance sheets and projects that did not make economic sense at lower metal prices.

Miners were forced to write down assets, reduce dividends, sell mines and issue shares at depressed prices. Investors suffered not only because gold declined, but also because many management teams had misallocated the cash generated during the boom.

That experience helps explain today's reaction. Investors see gold and mining shares falling and assume another painful cycle of shrinking margins, impaired assets and emergency balance-sheet repairs is about to begin.

The share-price volatility may look familiar. The companies underneath it generally do not.

A Stronger Starting Point Than in 2012

To understand what has changed, it is useful to compare the end of 2025 with the end of 2012. Gold prices were historically strong in both periods, and each was followed by a sharp decline in the metal.

The comparison therefore gives us a useful starting-point test. If gold remains volatile or enters a more challenging period, how prepared are today's major producers compared with the last time a strong gold market began to reverse?

The table below compares four large gold miners using two straightforward measures: operating margin and net debt. Operating margin is operating income divided by revenue, while net debt is total debt less cash and cash equivalents.

Major Gold Miners: 2012 Versus 2025

Source: FactSet. Figures are in U.S. dollars. A negative net-debt figure means cash exceeded total debt—in other words, the company was in a net-cash position. The figures are intended to compare each company with its own prior financial position rather than rank companies of different sizes against one another.

Compared with 2012, today's largest gold miners are carrying less financial risk and generating wider operating margins. All four producers posted operating margins above 43% in 2025, exceeding their 2012 margins even though gold prices were historically strong in both periods.

The balance-sheet improvement is equally striking. All four companies carried net debt in 2012; by the end of 2025, each held more cash than debt.

That combination of wider margins and stronger balance sheets gives today's leading miners a much stronger starting point if gold remains volatile or enters a more challenging period.

Net-cash balance sheets also give management teams more flexibility. They are less likely to be forced into distressed asset sales, dividend cuts or shareholder dilution simply to repair their finances.

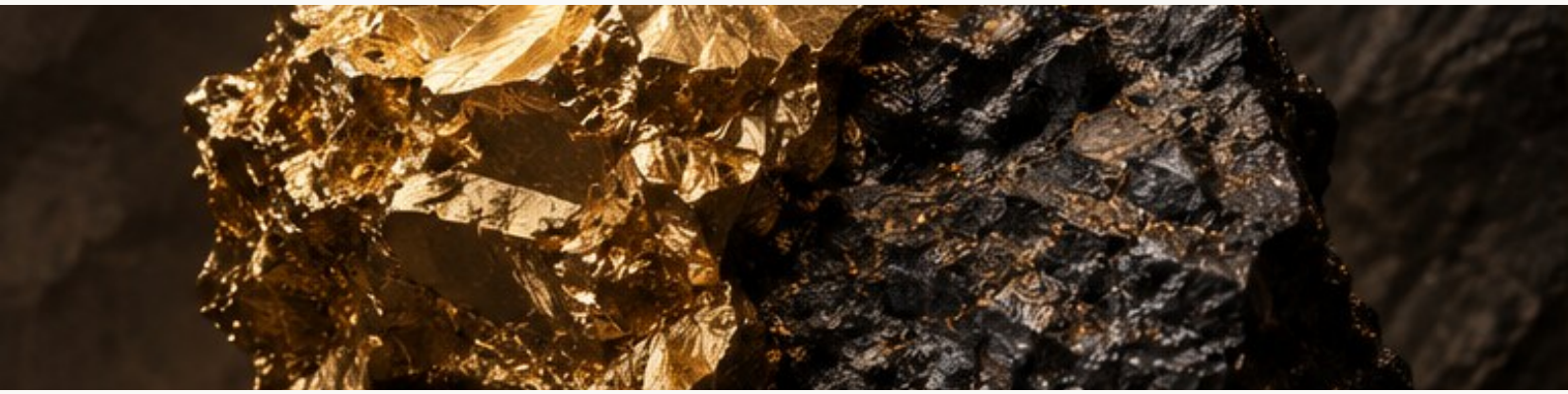
Gold Is Down, but the Miners Remain Highly Profitable

Stronger balance sheets are only part of the story. Gold has declined meaningfully from its January high, but spot gold was still trading near $4,045 per ounce on July 31, according to Reuters.

The industry commonly uses all-in sustaining costs, or AISC, to estimate the ongoing cost of producing an ounce of gold. AISC generally includes direct mining costs, sustaining capital expenditures and certain corporate and administrative expenses.

It is not a perfect measure. It does not include every tax, financing cost or investment in future growth, and companies can calculate portions of it differently.

MICHAEL JOSEPH, CFA



Still, subtracting AISC from the gold price provides a useful shorthand for understanding mine-level economics.

Newmont, for example, reported 2025 gold byproduct AISC of $1,358 per ounce in its full-year results. Compared with spot gold near $4,045, that implies a spread of roughly $2,687 per ounce before corporate costs, taxes, financing expenses and growth investments.

That does not mean earnings are immune to falling gold prices. A $100 decline in the price received for an ounce of gold can have an outsized effect on profit because most mining costs remain in place.

But there is an important difference between lower profits and unprofitable mines. Even after the pullback, current gold prices remain far above the production costs reported by leading miners.

The Industry Has Changed Its Priorities

Wide margins only benefit shareholders when management allocates the resulting cash intelligently.

That was the industry's biggest failure during the prior boom. Strong gold prices encouraged many executives to pursue acquisitions, marginal projects and production targets instead of protecting returns on capital.

Today, leading miners place much more emphasis on:

Free cash flow rather than production growth alone

Returns on invested capital

Maintaining conservative balance sheets

Increasing reserves and production on a per-share basis

Returning excess cash through dividends and share repurchases

Requiring higher returns before approving major projects

Investors are right to greet corporate promises with some skepticism. Mining remains a depleting business, which means companies must continually invest in exploration, development or acquisitions simply to replace the ounces they produce.

There will always be pressure to chase the next large deposit. But capital-allocation frameworks are more explicit today, and shareholders have become less tolerant of empire building.

The better miners understand that producing more gold does not create value when achieving that growth requires excessive debt, dilution or overpriced acquisitions. The emphasis is increasingly on producing more value per share, not merely more ounces.

These Miners Can Earn Their Way Higher

The opportunity does not depend entirely on gold immediately returning to record highs.

Should gold merely stabilize at a level well above industry production costs, disciplined miners can continue generating meaningful earnings and free cash flow. That cash can be used to strengthen their businesses and increase shareholder value.

Management teams have several options:

Reduce debt or build net cash

Repurchase shares when valuations are attractive

Pay sustainable dividends

Fund exploration around existing mines

Develop only the highest-return projects

Acquire assets without placing the balance sheet at risk

In other words, these companies do not necessarily need the market to rescue them. They can earn their way toward higher valuations if earnings remain strong and capital discipline holds.

That creates a credible path to investment returns. Continued profitability can produce more cash, while intelligent capital allocation can translate that cash into dividends, fewer shares outstanding and stronger per-share production or reserve metrics.

Eventually, the market may recognize that a financially stronger industry earning substantial

ORVEN

FIXED INCOME

Find the balance.

A considered approach to income.



FICTIONAL BRAND • DESIGN PROOF ONLY

Company	2012 operating margin	2025 operating margin	2012 net debt	2025 net debt/(net cash)
Newmont	30.56%	46.85%	$4.53 billion	($2.53 billion)
Barrick	38.41%	46.90%	$11.76 billion	($2.00 billion)
Agnico Eagle	26.77%	53.14%	$477 million	($2.553 billion)
Kinross	29.97%	43.19%	$577 million	($997 million)

profits is not destined to repeat the mistakes of the last bust.

Selection Still Matters

None of this means investors should buy every stock with the word gold in its description.

Mining companies still face substantial risks, including:

Cost inflation and declining ore grades

Labor disputes and construction delays

Political, tax and environmental uncertainty

Poorly timed acquisitions

Dependence on one or two major mines

A company with a weak asset, unreliable management team or stretched valuation can remain a poor investment even when the broader industry is healthy.

We look beyond a miner's production forecast or headline AISC. We evaluate mine lives, reserve quality, balance sheets, jurisdictional exposure, capital requirements and management's record of allocating shareholder capital.

Valuation matters, too. A better business is not automatically a better stock if its share price already assumes flawless execution and permanently elevated gold prices.

That need for selectivity is one reason owning a professionally managed gold-equity strategy differs from simply buying a basket of miners. The goal is not merely to obtain maximum exposure to the gold price; it is to own the businesses most likely to convert that exposure into durable per-share value.

This Time Does Not Have to Be the Same

Gold miners may continue to fall faster than gold when sentiment turns against the metal. That operating leverage works in both directions, and volatility comes with the territory.

Investors are also right to remember what happened after the prior gold boom. The industry destroyed substantial shareholder capital, and trust must be earned rather than assumed.

But the lesson from the last cycle was not that gold miners are inherently uninvestable. It was that debt, poor capital allocation and growth for growth's sake can turn a commodity decline into a corporate crisis.

Many of today's leading producers are entering this period with less leverage, wider margins and a clearer commitment to shareholder returns. If that discipline persists, they can continue creating value even without an immediate recovery in gold.

Investors looking at the latest decline may be tempted to say, "Here we go again."

They may instead be looking at an opportunity created by a market that has not yet recognized how much the gold-mining industry has changed.

Michael is a Portfolio Manager and Deputy Chief Investment Officer at SAM, a Registered Investment Advisor with the United States Securities and Exchange Commission. File number: 801-107061. He sources investment opportunities and conducts ongoing due diligence across SAM's portfolios. Prior to joining SAM, Michael worked with high-net-worth private clients for the largest independent wealth management firm in the United States. He was also a senior analyst for one of the largest investment-grade bond managers in America. Michael joined SAM in 2017. At the time of publication, some of SAM's portfolio strategies hold positions in securities mentioned in this article. Holdings are subject to change without notice and should not be construed as a recommendation to buy or sell any security.

Sources and Backlinks

World Gold Council, "Central Banks," Gold Demand Trends: Full Year 2025

World Gold Council, "Central Banks," Gold Demand Trends: Q1 2026

Reuters, "Gold retreats but poised to end best month since February," July 31, 2026

Newmont, 2025 Fourth-Quarter and Full-Year Results

FactSet financial data supplied by the author: 2012 and 2025 operating margins and net debt for Newmont, Barrick, Agnico Eagle and Kinross



ANA M. MARQUES
Contributor
ana.marques@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: uk.linkedin.com/in/ana-m-marques

The biscuit that built an empire

What a Belgian biscuit and an unexpected partnership can teach wealth firms about growth.

BY ANA M. MARQUES

Fractional COO and founder of Alignis Global

LinkedIn



EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION

ANA M. MARQUES

The biscuit that built an empire

Sometimes the fastest route to growth isn't a bigger marketing budget. It's the right partner. Here's what a Belgian biscuit and a regional hospice have in common.

For decades, Lotus Biscoff was the little caramelised biscuit that turned up on your saucer at the hairdresser's, as a side kick to your cappuccino. Nice. Forgettable. The thing you nibbled while someone asked whether you were going anywhere nice this year. It was the biscuit of waiting rooms, coffee trolleys and airline drink carts, the name itself, bis-coff, is a nod to that coffee pairing.

Today it is one of the fastest-growing flavors on the planet. You'll find it filling KitKats, coating Cadbury bars, swirled through premium ice cream and stacked inside Krispy Kreme donuts. The biscuit didn't change. The strategy did. And the lever that changed everything wasn't advertising. It was partnership.

That distinction matters far beyond the confectionery aisle. It matters enormously for founder-led wealth management firms, where the biggest jumps in growth almost never come from spending more on marketing. They come from aligning with the right people.

From coffee companion to global sensation

Lotus Bakeries began in Lembeke, Belgium, in 1932, when three Boone brothers turned a family recipe for caramelised speculoos into a business. For most of its history it was exactly what it appeared to be: a well-loved regional biscuit that travelled well as a coffee accompaniment, eventually making its way onto US airlines in the 1990s and passing €100 million in turnover by 1998.

The pivotal product innovation came in the late 2000s (2007–2008), when Lotus bottled the flavour as a spread, essentially cookie butter, and turned a biscuit into an ingredient. That single shift broadened the brand from something you ate into something you could build with, and it developed a genuine cult following.

Then, in June 2024, Lotus signed a strategic partnership with Mondelēz, the multinational behind Cadbury, Milka, Toblerone and Oreo. In one move, Biscoff stopped competing for shelf space and started riding shotgun with brands already sitting in nearly every supermarket cart on earth.

The results came fast:

Cadbury, Milka and Toblerone products began appearing in co-branded Biscoff editions

A KitKat Biscoff variant landed on shelves

Krispy Kreme built entire limited-edition donut ranges around the Biscoff spread

Biscoff ice cream, first launched in 2019, lined up a global rollout through Mondelēz's ice-cream partner Froneri, starting across Europe in 2026

The lesson isn't "make a nice biscuit." Plenty of companies have a lovely product that nobody can scale. The lesson is that the right partnership can do in eighteen months what a solo marketing budget might not achieve in eighteen years. Lotus didn't try to out-muscle the chocolate giants. It plugged into their distribution and let the flavour do the talking.

Why this is the wealth manager's lesson, not the confectioner's

At first glance, a Belgian biscuit and a boutique advisory firm have nothing in common. Look closer and the mechanics are identical.

Wealth management is a business built on four things: reputation, trust, pipeline and turnover. Advertising can nudge all four, but only weakly, because financial advice is one of the highest trust purchases a person ever makes. Nobody hands over their life savings, their inheritance planning or their family's future because they

ANA M. MARQUES

The biscuit that built an empire

saw a well-placed banner ad. They do it because someone they respect vouched for you, or because your name is quietly attached to something they already care about.

That is precisely what a partnership delivers and an advertising campaign cannot:

Reputation by association. Biscoff borrowed the credibility of Cadbury and Krispy Kreme overnight. A firm that aligns with a respected local institution borrows its standing in the community, instantly, and far more believably than any self-authored campaign claiming "trusted advisers since 1998."

Trust that compounds. Partnerships create repeated, low-pressure touchpoints in contexts where the client isn't being sold to. Every time a client encounters your name in a setting they value, the relationship deepens a little. Trust isn't bought in a single impression; it accrues.

A warmer pipeline. Referrals from a shared relationship arrive pre-qualified and pre-warmed. A walk-in who already associates your firm with something meaningful is a fundamentally different prospect from a cold lead who clicked an ad.

Turnover that follows the trust. In advice, revenue lags relationship. When trust and referrals rise, assets under management and turnover follow, not in the same quarter, but reliably.

The catch is that most firms reach for the campaign because it feels controllable and measurable, while a partnership feels soft and slow. In my experience working with founder-led businesses, that instinct is almost always backwards.

A hospice, a third of a budget, and a firm that stopped advertising

One firm I worked with makes the point better than any theory.

They were spending thousands every month on advertising and marketing that, frankly, went nowhere. Impressions without intimacy. Meanwhile, a few miles down the road sat a charity hospice with an extraordinary reputation across the region, the kind of place that had quietly touched almost every family in the area. When we actually mapped it, a striking pattern emerged: the vast majority of the firm's clients had a family member, a father, a mother, an auntie, a grandparent, who had been cared for there, and cared for beautifully.

So, we made an unusual call. We stopped the advertising and marketing campaigns and redirected a full third, yes, a third, of that budget into sponsoring the hospice.

Within months, the shift was unmistakable. Clients began mentioning it to their advisers, unprompted. "I saw you're supporting them now; they were wonderful with my dad." And then something more valuable happened. Those conversations cracked open a door. Clients who had been all business started opening up about the vulnerable parts of their lives, end-of-life wishes, ageing parents, what they wanted to leave behind and to whom. For a wealth firm, those are not tangents. Those are the conversations.

The effect was threefold. It built immense trust with the existing client base, because the firm was now visibly aligned with something those clients held sacred. It increased referrals, as clients spoke about the firm in emotional rather than transactional terms. And it drove genuine walk-ins from a community that now recognised

ANA M. MARQUES

The biscuit that built an empire

the name and associated it with care rather than commerce.

A meaningful partnership proved worth more than a stack of campaigns, not because sponsorship is magic, but because it met the clients where their trust and emotion already lived.

The real lesson: know what speaks to your clients

The hospice worked because it was the right partner for that firm's clients, not because hospices are universally good marketing. Copy-pasting someone else's partnership is how firms waste money in a more expensive way.

Biscoff didn't partner with just anyone. It partnered with other sweet, indulgent consumables, chocolate, ice cream, donuts, because that is exactly where its flavor and its fans already lived. The alignment was the whole point.

For your firm, the right partner will be wherever your clients' trust and identity already sit. It might be the local golf club where half your clients spend their Saturdays. It might be the church or community group at the center of their week. It might be a school, a sports team, a regional charity, an arts venue. The specific answer is less important than the discipline of asking the question honestly: Where do my clients already place their trust, and how do I stand alongside it rather than shout over it?

Growth, it turns out, isn't always about doing more yourself. Sometimes it's about finding the one partner whose reputation makes your firm impossible to overlook, and being clear-eyed enough to know which partner that actually is.

The biscuit understood this. So did a small firm a few miles from a hospice.

What's the partnership that could put your firm somewhere your advertising will never reach?

Sources

[1] Lotus Bakeries, Company History — founding in 1932, €500 million Biscoff revenue milestone (2023), Mondelēz partnership. https://www.lotusbakeries.com/history

[2] Lotus Bakeries, Wikipedia — 2024 group revenue (€1.23 billion), ~70 countries, founding details. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lotus_Bakeries

[3] Lotus Biscoff, About Us — global reach and brand positioning. https://www.lotusbiscoff.com/en-us/about-us

[4] MatrixBCG, Brief History of Lotus Bakeries — 1990s US airline export, €100m turnover by 1998, Biscoff spread launch (2007–2008), Mondelēz India partnership. https://matrixbcg.com/blogs/brief-history/lotusbakeries

[5] PortersFiveForce, Brief History of Lotus Bakeries — spread launch window, expansion into ice cream and sandwich cookies, €1.2bn+ 2024 revenue. https://portersfiveforce.com/blogs/brief-history/lotusbakeries

[6] Quartr, Baking a Family Fortune: The Rise of Lotus Bakeries — Biscoff at 54% of branded revenue (2023), ~20% annual growth, 16% CAGR (2013–2023). https://quartr.com/insights/edge/baking-a-family-fortune-the-rise-of-lotus-bakeries

[7] DCF Analysis, Lotus Bakeries (LOTBBR) — 2024 revenue €1,232 million (+15.89% YoY). https://dcf-analysis.com/blogs/history/lotbbr

[8] Bakery & Snacks, Inside Biscoff's €500m boom — June 2024 Mondelēz strategic agreement; co-brands including Cadbury, Milka, Toblerone, KitKat, Krispy Kreme. https://www.bakeryandsnacks.com/Article/2026/08/11/lotus-bakeries-500m-biscoff-expansion-explained/

[9] Food Dive, Mondelēz and Biscoff parent expand partnership into ice cream — Froneri ice-cream rollout from 2026, Biscoff ice cream first launched 2019. https://www.fooddive.com/news/mondelez-and-biscoff-parent-lotus-expand-partnership-into-ice-cream/742488/

[10] Brand Eating, Biscoff Cookie Butter Donuts at Krispy Kreme — 2024 Krispy Kreme Biscoff donut range. https://www.brandeating.com/2024/01/krispy-kreme-2024-biscoff-donuts.html



PARKER ENCE
Guest Contributor
parker.ence@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/parkerence/

AI's evolution

Beyond agentic AI to a universal context layer for the advisory firm.

BY PARKER ENCE

Guest contributor | CEO and cofounder of Jump

LinkedIn



EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION

PARKER ENCE

AI’s evolution

Agentic AI marks an important shift from individual productivity to intelligent workflow execution. But the next phase extends beyond autonomous agents, positioning AI as an enterprise intelligence and orchestration layer powered by universal context across the organization and delivers stronger business outcomes.

AI has evolved from answering questions to generating content, automating workflows and increasingly acting through intelligent agents. But agentic AI is not the final destination. The future of AI extends beyond individual agents executing discrete tasks into firm-wide coordination, powered by a universal AI context layer. This layer synthesizes conversations, internal data, system integrations and more to provide context across business functions, enabling organizations to operate as a coordinated entity, improve cross-functional decision-making and increase organizational agility.

Microsoft's 2025 Work Trend Index highlights the emergence of "human-agent teams," where AI offers capabilities that complement human expertise. As those capabilities mature, AI is increasingly orchestrating complex workflows across multiple applications instead of operating within isolated systems. This evolution lays the foundation for an enterprise-wide platform that connects data, workflows and decisions into a shared operational system.

Wealth management is now entering AI's execution era, where competitive advantage comes less from what AI can generate and more from what AI can help firms accomplish across multiple business units within a firm.

From Prompts to Enterprise Execution

Every new technology investment creates another destination where work must travel. Client onboarding touches CRM, planning software, compliance, document management, custodial platforms, email and reporting systems.

When those systems don't communicate effectively, advisors and operations teams become the connective tissue, manually moving information from one application to the next.

The shift to agentic AI has multiplied the ways wealth management firms can reduce operational friction. Client interactions that once triggered chains of manual handoffs across the firm's tech stack can increasingly be coordinated by AI.

Unlike traditional automation, which follows rigid rules, agentic AI operates autonomously within established governance to coordinate those handoffs. It recognizes new information, routes work to the appropriate systems and escalates tasks for human review where appropriate. In practice, here’s what this might look like at a firm onboarding a new household: Rather than requiring staff to manually read forms, enter data across six systems, open accounts, trigger compliance reviews and prepare client communications, AI coordinates those steps automatically while routing approvals back to the advisor where judgment is required.

Financial professionals remain in control while routine execution moves seamlessly organization-wide, improving consistency, expanding organizational capacity and giving advisors more time to focus on client relationships and strategic decisions.

Agentic AI therefore represents a significant advance over traditional automation, but it is only one step in AI's broader evolution toward a universal layer of intelligence.

The Four Phases of AI Maturity

In wealth advisory enterprises, AI’s progression path from experimental to transformational can be categorized into four distinct phases of maturity.

These phases are not intended to represent a prescribed implementation sequence. Rather, they reflect the expanding capabilities AI can deliver as it becomes more deeply integrated into business operations. As firms expand AI capabilities, they unlock increasingly meaningful business outcomes that extend beyond productivity gains.

While every firm's AI business case will look different, the AI maturity generally follows these four phases:

Experimental — Exploring AI's Potential

Capability: AI is primarily used to answer questions, generate ideas and support individual experimentation with limited integration or governance.

PARKER ENCE

AI's evolution

Business Impact: Discovery — Early value is largely anecdotal as firms identify where AI can improve work.

Operational — Improving Everyday Execution

Capability: AI becomes part of defined workflows, assisting with routine tasks and improving consistency across day-to-day operations.

Business Impact: Efficiency — Organizations save time, reduce manual work and free employees to focus on higher-value activities.

Strategic — Scaling Intelligent Operations

Capability: AI executes increasingly complex workflows across connected systems using firm-specific data, processes and governance.

Business Impact: Growth — AI helps uncover opportunities, boost client engagement and expand organizational capacity.

Transformational — AI as the Intelligence and Orchestration Layer

Capability: AI provides the enterprise's universal context, supporting intelligence and orchestration layers that coordinate and execute work across the organization while people focus on judgment, relationships and strategic decisions.

Business Impact: Competitive Moat — AI becomes a durable competitive advantage by enabling firms to execute more consistently, deepen personalization, innovate faster, increase organizational agility and create new revenue opportunities.

Together, these phases illustrate how AI evolves from an individual productivity tool into a firm-wide layer of intelligence and orchestration powered by universal context.

Note that different business units may achieve different phases of AI maturity at different times based on their objectives, workflows and operational requirements, especially in large firms.

Beyond Agentic: AI Becomes the Universal AI Context Layer

The distinction between agentic AI and transformational AI powered by universal context becomes easier to understand by comparing how work happens today with what becomes possible in the transformational phase.

How AI is Applied Today

Client information often resides across CRM platforms, portfolio management systems, financial planning software, custodial platforms, calendars, email, meeting transcripts and compliance applications.

Advisors and operations teams spend considerable time locating information, updating multiple systems, transferring data between applications and verifying that every step has been completed. Even when AI agents automate individual tasks, they typically operate within a single workflow or application.

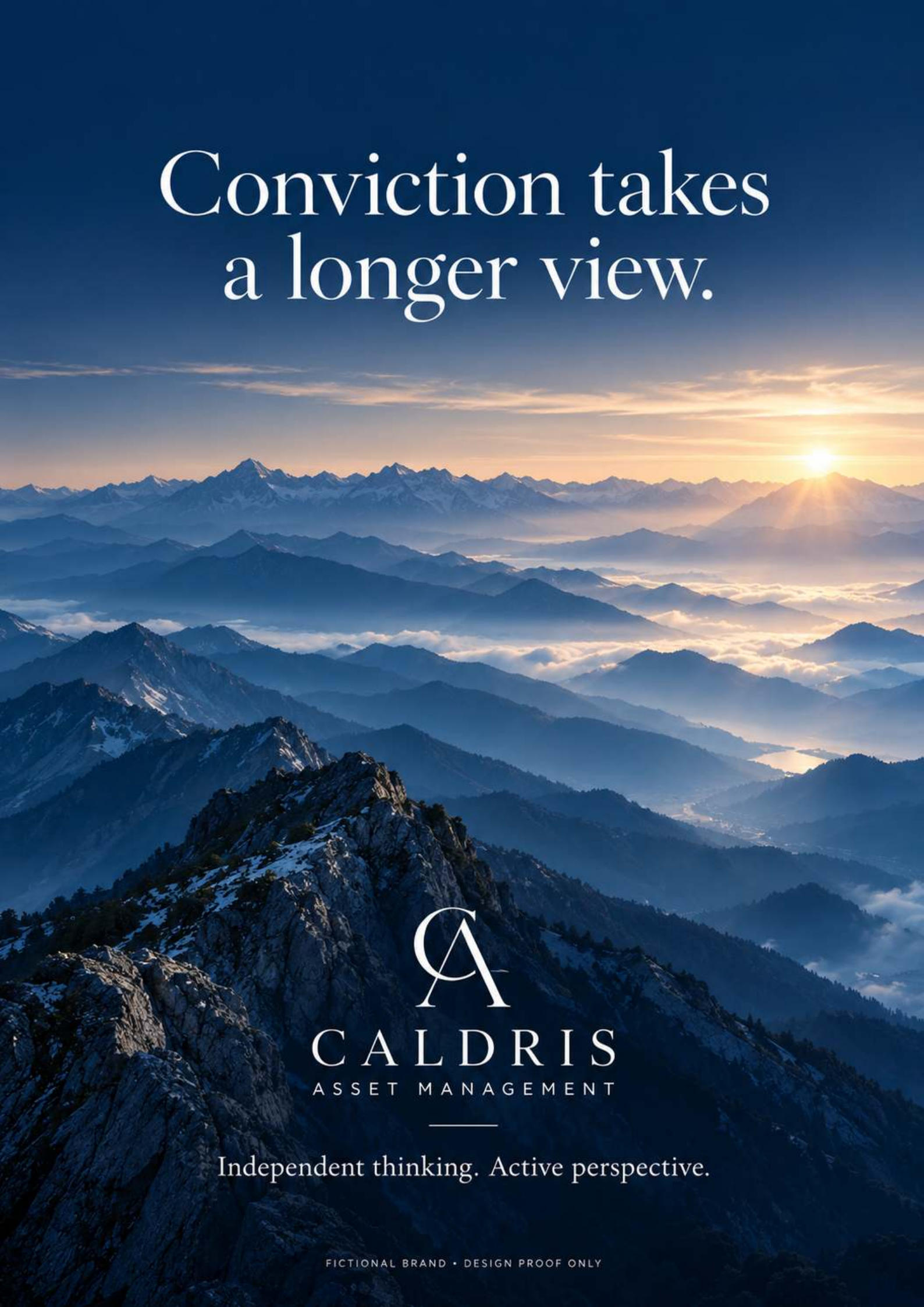
How a Universal AI Context Layer Changes Work

Rather than coordinating activity within a defined workflow, transformational AI sits above existing technology, securely connecting existing systems without requiring firms to replace them.

Instead of an advisor manually reviewing planning assumptions and preparing presentation materials, while support staff schedules follow-up meetings and documents next steps, the universal AI layer coordinates those activities across multiple systems. The benefits span organization-wide layering in compliance considerations, updating the CRM and performing other due diligence.

Because every connected system shares the same context, advisors spend less time coordinating work. The entire firm benefits by delivering more consistent service, responding faster to client needs and uncovering opportunities that might otherwise go unnoticed.

The universal context layer also changes how firms measure AI success. Instead of tracking the number of reports generated, emails drafted or meeting notes summarized, organizations increasingly measure completed business outcomes that reflect organizational performance. That might look like new households onboarded, accounts opened, planning recommendations implemented, compliance reviews completed and client follow-up activities executed. The focus shifts


Conviction takes
a longer view.
CALDRIS
ASSET MANAGEMENT
Independent thinking. Active perspective.
FICTIONAL BRAND • DESIGN PROOF ONLY

PARKER ENCE

AI's evolution

from the volume of AI activity to cross-functional business results.

Perhaps most importantly, this universal AI context layer is platform agnostic. Whether a firm's data resides in CRM systems, data warehouses, custodial platforms or planning applications matters less than the ability to securely connect those systems. AI brings together structured and unstructured data from across the organization, creating the foundational guidance needed to coordinate work, surface opportunities and drive action across business units. Rather than replacing existing platforms, the universal context layer securely connects them, preserving systems of record while creating a shared source of truth across the enterprise.

This evolution represents a fundamental shift in how firms think about AI. The question is no longer, "How can AI help complete this task?" but rather, "How can AI help the entire organization operate more intelligently?"

The result extends well beyond individual productivity gains. Organizations improve company-wide execution, expand capacity without proportional headcount growth, deliver more consistent client experiences, personalize advice at scale, accelerate innovation and create the operational flexibility needed to support long-term growth.

Designing for Connected Intelligence

The firms that will benefit most in this new era will prioritize strategy over tools, rethinking the fundamental design of work before introducing AI solutions.

Layering point solutions onto fragmented processes yields only marginal gains; the real power lies in redesigning workflows within a unified context layer to create a fundamentally more agile operating model.

Ultimately, connected intelligence does more than automate tasks. It builds a resilient foundation that allows firms to pivot quickly as client expectations and regulations evolve.

That doesn't mean that firms need to become AI-native overnight. The first step is understanding where work becomes fragmented.

Which processes require multiple handoffs?

Where do financial professionals repeatedly re-enter information?

Which workflows span several systems?

Identifying these friction points helps organizations prioritize where connected AI can create the greatest operational value.

Benefits Extend Beyond Siloed Productivity

Productivity gains characterized the early phases of AI adoption. As AI becomes more connected, however, the opportunity expands from improving individual productivity to improving firm-wide execution and capacity.

Firms facing advisor shortages, rising client expectations and growing operational complexity need new ways to scale without continually adding headcount. A universal AI context layer enables organizations to expand capacity by streamlining work across the business.

As execution becomes more consistent, firms can onboard clients faster, reduce operational risk, deliver more personalized client experiences, respond more quickly to changing client needs and expand organizational capacity without proportionally increasing headcount.

The Enterprise Intelligence Era

Generative AI changed how individuals work. Agentic AI changed how work gets done. The next phase changes how the enterprise itself operates by creating a universal AI context layer that connects data, systems, workflows and people through shared intelligence.

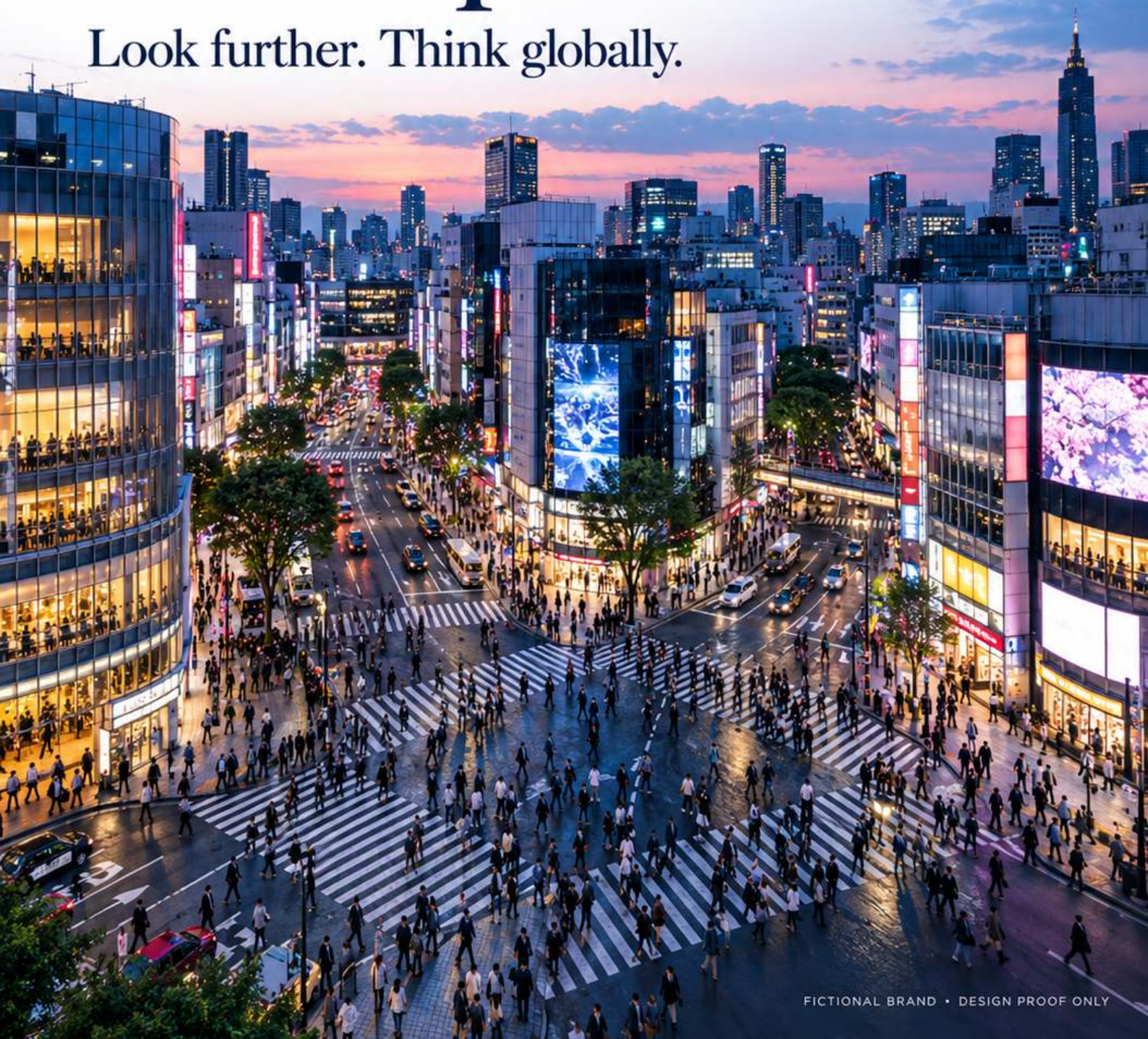
For wealth management firms, the opportunity is not simply to deploy more AI, but to build the connected foundation that allows AI to work across the enterprise. Firms that plan for that future today will be best positioned to compete as AI continues its evolution.

Parker Ence is the CEO and co-founder of Jump, the leading artificial intelligence (AI) operating system for financial advisors and other financial services providers.

MEROVA
GLOBAL FUNDS

The next opportunity has no postcode.

Look further. Think globally.



FICTIONAL BRAND • DESIGN PROOF ONLY


PETER SAALFIELD
Guest Contributor
peter.saalfield@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/peter-saalfield-18770b42

Must-haves for sellers

What an advisory firm needs to earn a top multiple.

BY PETER SAALFIELD

Contributor | Financial Journalist

PETER SAALFIELD
LinkedIn

Talk to enough RIA acquirers, investment bankers, and others involved in wealth management dealmaking, and you will start to hear the same thing over and over: most advisors have no idea how difficult it is to receive a great valuation.

There are several reasons why huge multiples are less common than most advisors think.

First, the "headline" multiple—the topline figure used when a deal is announced—may be deceiving. Much of it is contingent on aggressive, multi-year retention and growth targets. Often, it is at least partly paid in equity rather than in immediate cash at closing.

Second, only a limited number of buyers can offer the best deals—typically private equity-backed firms that have built robust infrastructure to increase firms' profitability and accelerate their growth.

And, perhaps most importantly, buyers are only willing to pay top dollar for firms that meet certain criteria: strong organic growth, solid second-generation talent, and a clear desire for long-term expansion.

Organic growth, organic growth, organic growth

More than 90% of RIAs in the US have negligible or negative growth when market performance is factored in. Only those with robust growth, excluding market performance, receive top offers.

In the current environment, even 2% or 3% growth net of market is a demonstrable difference that can work to a seller's advantage. Firms that receive top offers are often growing much faster than that.

Buyers also analyze the underlying drivers of a firm's growth: assets gained from new clients, assets lost from departing clients, assets gained from inflows from existing clients, and assets lost to outflows from existing clients—collectively referred to as "net new assets." If a seller's net new assets have consistently been positive, buyers will be interested.

The emphasis on organic growth has led many firms to look beyond referral-only business development and adopt formalized marketing processes that involve content creation, digital advertising, group affiliations, and other tactics.

Firms are increasingly marketing to specific types of clients—business owners approaching a sale, tech executives with concentrated stock, workers in specific fields—and adding services like tax preparation and planning, estate planning and insurance in hopes of capturing new assets.

PETER SAALFIELD

Must-haves for sellers

Second-generation strength

Aside from growth, the biggest differentiator between a decent multiple and a terrific multiple is having a strong second generation of advisors in place.

Buyers are turned off when they think a founder is simply looking to sell and get out, especially if they manage most of the firm's relationships. For a buyer, those kinds of deals just mean more work: hiring a replacement, retaining clients, building trust, etc. They also introduce the risk that employees will follow the founder out the door.

Buyers are thrilled when firms already has one or more younger advisors in place—especially when those advisors already drive most of the firm's revenue and can bring in new clients on their own. If the second generation already has equity in the firm, even better. It signals that the business has developed beyond its founder and has people with a financial stake in its long-term success.

Sellers should be prepared to not only sell themselves but also the next generation: How did they get to where they are? What are their ambitions? How do they intend to grow the business after the founder departs? The more buyers can envision the firm thriving without its founder, the more comfortable they will be paying a premium for it.

Master the intangibles

With all the activity in the RIA M&A market, buyers today have the luxury of choice. This means sellers must not only have strong fundamentals; they must also convince potential purchasers that they have the right attitude.

This means demonstrating an appetite for additional growth. Sellers should be prepared to show that, with the right support, they think their expansion will accelerate. That could mean outlining opportunities to attract new clients, enter new markets, recruit additional advisors or broaden their services. Buyers increasingly want evidence that an acquisition can become more valuable after the deal closes, rather than simply continuing along its existing trajectory.

It also means buyers are putting additional emphasis on firm culture, trying to find partners who are on the same wavelength and who they will work well with. That includes alignment around everything from client service and employee management to the pace and ambitions of future growth.

Don't forget the basics

One of the most basic elements that makes a potential seller attractive is having full-time, W-2 advisors. Firms with 1099 advisors receive lower offers because they are selling revenue that they don't own.

Sellers should also have clean, well-organized financials. Buyers want to clearly understand a firm's revenue, expenses, and profitability so they can determine which costs are truly necessary to run the business. Messy books or compensation arrangements that are hard to untangle can make buyers less confident in the earnings they are basing their offer on.

Sellers should also make sure their legal, compliance, and employment paperwork is in order before going to market. Outstanding regulatory issues, unclear employee agreements, or other problems uncovered during due diligence can all drag down an offer—or derail a deal altogether.

Build a firm you don't need to sell

Ultimately, the firms that command the highest multiples tend to be the ones that would be perfectly fine without a deal. They are growing, their next generation is already taking on meaningful responsibility, and their businesses can thrive without the founder at the center of everything.

That points to a useful paradox for advisors contemplating a sale: the best way to prepare your firm to be acquired is to build it as though you have no intention of selling it at all.



MICHELLE BORKOWSKI
F2 Strategy Contributor
michelle.borkowski@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/michelle-borkowski-66b27331

Why Personalization Remains Elusive in Wealth Management

A four-step framework for turning client information into genuinely personal advice.

BY MICHELLE BORKOWSKI / F2 STRATEGY

EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION

MICHELLE BORKOWSKI / F2 STRATEGY

Why Personalization Remains Elusive in Wealth Management

Traditionally, advisors' client experiences were measured only against the experiences offered by other wealth management firms. Today, clients measure every experience against a global, cross-industry standard for personalization. Brands like Amazon prompt consumers ordering school supplies to purchase laptop accessories. Netflix recommends content based on individual viewing habits. Hotel apps remember guests' preferred room types.

But the wealth management industry largely hasn't caught up to the seamless personalization of other industries. Instead, advisors still default to one-size-fits-all experiences because they haven't adapted their operating models to keep up with today's shifting consumer expectations. This gap leaves clients feeling underwhelmed with their advisors, but advisors can course correct with a straightforward framework.

The Personalization Gap

The gap appears when advisors send generic monthly newsletters, schedule meetings on a predetermined cadence or send broad holiday messaging rather than considering life events, market performance and personal client beliefs. Other well-intentioned campaigns aimed at segments such as women investors often inaccurately assume commonality in goals, family structures, financial responsibilities and risk tolerances.

Although technological advancements and artificial intelligence (AI) have helped address the personalization gap, there's still work to be done. One of the biggest areas of disconnect is the long-standing separation of marketing, data and technology. These three functions are most impactful when they work together.

In the book Traction, entrepreneur and business operating-system creator Gino Wickman argues that organizations outgrow the very operating models that helped them succeed. Firms have invested in data, digital and marketing capabilities, yet their impact remains muted by siloed operations and competing objectives.

Closing the Gap Requires an Operational Shift

One book that resonates across the wealth management industry is Will Guidara's Unreasonable Hospitality. Guidara, the former co-owner of the acclaimed restaurant Eleven Madison Park, describes how elite hospitality brands create memorable moments by centering personalized experiences around the details that matter most.

That idea has struck a chord because at its core, wealth management is a relationship business. Advisors already have it in their DNA to deliver service on par with luxury restaurants and five-star hotels. To replicate that level of service across an expanding client base, firms must

Before introducing new technology or modifying procedures, ask a few foundational questions:

MICHELLE BORKOWSKI / F2 STRATEGY

Why Personalization Remains Elusive in Wealth Management

implement a firmwide strategy to infuse deeper personalization into their operating models.

A Four-Step Framework for Personalization

1. Start with strategic conversations

Before introducing new technology or modifying procedures, ask a few foundational questions:

Is our current operating model unified or bifurcated?

How are we capturing and using client information across the firm to support growth?

Do we have the right data, including unstructured information, to drive personalization?

How do we balance AI innovation with governance and risk?

2. Organize around shared priorities

Redefine the firm's operating philosophy, shifting from a service mindset to a hospitality mindset that shapes every advisor interaction and every client experience. Then, align around this common set of priorities:

Deliver contextual interactions instead of one-size-fits-all communications.

Unify data, marketing and technology around a trusted, shared source of client intelligence to replace disconnected systems.

Invest in organizational design and change management so new ways of working become consistent, repeatable and sustainable across the firm.

3. Build an intelligence layer

Create a more complete picture of each client by converging CRM data, planning systems, meeting notes, emails and other unstructured information.

A unified intelligence layer should:

Identify behavioral patterns, life events and client preferences, then surface timely, relevant insights that help advisors engage clients in more meaningful ways.

Coordinate information across business functions to deliver a consistent client experience.

4. Redefine how success is measured

Operational metrics such as CRM adoption, system uptime and marketing campaign reach still matter. But firms should also measure outcomes such as:

Were advisors alerted at the right moment?

How are we capturing and using client information across the firm to support growth?

MICHELLE BORKOWSKI / F2 STRATEGY

Why Personalization Remains Elusive in Wealth Management

Did marketing reinforce the advisor's conversation?

Did a life event trigger proactive guidance instead of another generic communication?

Together, these four steps create a roadmap for delivering the "next-best experience," not simply the next-best action.

If a client mentions that her daughter is interested in attending Georgetown University and that conversation triggers an automated email about 529 plans, the information is relevant, but fairly generic.

If instead, the advisor is prompted to introduce the client to a colleague who serves on Georgetown's alumni admissions committee, the client will remember the interaction because it reflects something they shared personally and connects it to a thoughtful, human response.

When information flows across the firm instead of remaining trapped in departmental silos, advisors can create experiences that strengthen relationships and build trust over time.

Relationships Remain the Gold Standard

As consumers become more comfortable using large language models (LLMs) for everything from medical advice to vacation planning, humans still hold an advantage. Advisors offer judgment, empathy and trust built through personal connections.

A published article with tax tips can be helpful; however, it won't have the same impact as a conversation about tax-advantaged investment opportunities shaped by a client's unique goals and circumstances.

Strengthening the Human Connection

Closing the industry's personalization gap depends on firms' ability to bring together AI, data and marketing to strengthen the human connection. When advisors have timely insights and a more complete understanding of their clients, they can deliver the thoughtful, personalized experiences people have come to expect across every industry.

In the end, that's what earns lasting trust and makes personalization feel genuinely personal.

Michelle Borkowski is the head of marketing and Jaclyn (Jaci) Stanton is a managing director at F2 Strategy, a leading wealth management technology and marketing services firm.

Do we have the right data, including unstructured information, to drive personalization?

ELYNT
INVESTMENTS

Move beyond the obvious.

New perspectives.
Connected possibilities.

FICTIONAL BRAND • DESIGN PROOF ONLY

Reset & Refocus

Space to think. Confidence to act.



CAROLINE HOLT / WOMEN IN FINANCE LEAD

PROGRAMME IMAGERY / CAROLINE HOLT SPEAKER PACK

Caroline Holt's Reset & Refocus webinar created a timely point of connection for women in finance: an opportunity to step back, consider what matters next and decide where to direct their energy for the remainder of the year.

The September 29 session forms part of Modern American Advisor's Women in Finance activity. The post-event debrief records 299 registrations and 76 live attendees. These are distinct measures: registrations show interest in the event, while live attendance records those who joined the session itself.

The follow-up invitation gives the clearest practical expression of the next step. Participants were invited to explore what the session brought up for them, what they wanted to achieve before year-end and what might get in

That approach connects with the wider Women in Finance programme's focus on confidence, visibility and leadership development. Professional development needs room for reflection as well as action: identifying a priority is useful, but deciding how to sustain it alongside a demanding role is where support can matter.

A recording is available for those who would like to revisit the session. Attendees were also offered a complimentary 45-minute Refocus Session with Caroline. Readers who did not attend can enquire about the programme and available coaching options through the booking link.



PROGRAMME IMAGERY / CAROLINE HOLT SPEAKER PACK

EDITORIAL DRAFT / Caroline approval required. Recap based on supplied event and follow-up materials. Recording not independently reviewed.

A different kind of confidence



“This course helped me find out about myself and what I really wanted to achieve - not what I thought I ought to achieve.”

Lead Compliance Manager, Irwin Mitchell

“I have recently been appointed as the Head of our team and am confident I can do the job. All in all, I feel much more confident, productive and positive.”

Department Head, Handelsbanken Wealth & Asset Management

Testimonials relate to Caroline’s wider leadership programme, not this webinar. Programme imagery supplied in her speaker pack.

“It’s also a privilege to be part of a supporting network of like-minded professional women from the wealth and finance sector.”

Executive Director, Quilter Cheviot

Watch the recording

https://zoom.us/rec/share/upiRsRVYAdsod35nXRaCooBHjplL_uccxeCHl1y8orzJjMpNkWdTvyhNJjFfU1qD.Jx_HqmmLJnO8LxNG

Enquire / book with Caroline

https://calendly.com/attitudecoach/strategy-call

Replay access requires the event passcode. Contact Caroline through the booking address for coaching enquiries.



KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
ken.boyd@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/ken-boyd-28616317/

Fusion Financial Partners: Building Independent RIA Businesses for Elite Advisors

Kimberly Papedis on moving from advisor to recruiter, building the business and retaining control.

BY KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
LinkedIn



EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION



KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
ken.boyd@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/ken-boyd-28616317/

Fusion Financial Partners: Building Independent RIA Businesses for Elite Advisors

Modern American Advisor interviewed Kimberly Papedis, President & Managing Partner,

Fusion Financial Partners.

MAA: Why did you sell your book of business and decide to go into what you do now?

Kimberly Papedis: Yes, I get that question. I think, for me personally, being a financial advisor as a woman was very different than a lot of my male counterparts.

I became very close to a lot of my clients. And while that was great from a professional perspective, especially because I was so young and it helped me get over that very first meeting where someone would see me and say, well, you're 23 years old; how am I supposed to trust you with my money?

It became a little bit daunting because I became more of a friend than a financial advisor. A lot of times, that professional boundary was crossed. I would get phone calls in the middle of the night from a client whose spouse was cheating on her, and she wasn't sure what to do.

Personal finance is a sensitive topic that they're trusting you with. I think that lent itself to me becoming more of a counselor. So the more I talked with other financial advisors and peers, I really realized that I liked to mentor, and that led me down the path to recruiting.

So I sold my independent practice and went to work for a brief stint at First Global, which at the time was a broker-dealer that was trying to entice CPAs to get licensed and add financial services to their portfolio. I was there very briefly and then went to work for Raymond James. I was based in Colorado at the time.

Raymond James was a natural fit. I really enjoyed talking to advisors. I especially enjoyed speaking to advisors about breaking away from a captive employee-type environment and launching their own firm.

You know, it's an interesting sale because it's really a big decision. It's talking to somebody about not just changing firms, but really making a big lifestyle change and leaving that comfort of a W-2 environment and launching and becoming a business owner, which is very, very different.

MAA: When was that First Global experience?

Kimberly Papedis: That was around 2005. During that time, some CPAs pulled it off, but I would say the majority of them were not very comfortable. They were they're risk averse, right? And so for them transitioning, going from taxes to then talking about risk and suitability, it was very uncomfortable for a lot of those clients.

CPAs would sort of dip their toe in, find out they weren't comfortable, or that the clients were comfortable and it just didn't work.

I think that it made a good argument for why someone who wanted to build out a holistic financial planning group to have the CPA business separate and do a professional referral back and forth. We've seen that work much better than someone who tries to wear both hats.

MAA: You've done this so successfully for so long. How much of it at this point is referral versus you doing your own marketing?

Kimberly Papedis: For us, it's a mixture. I would say it's close to 90% referral. And the referrals are coming from not just our past clients, but also from the industry.

So the custodians will bring us in to help if the team is stuck and they're not quite sure. A lot of


KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
ken.boyd@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/ken-boyd-28616317/

Fusion Financial Partners: Building Independent RIA Businesses for Elite Advisors

teams, when they decide to go fully independent and launch their own RIA, get kind of paralysis by analysis. There are so many people out there telling them so many different things and giving them advice that it becomes overwhelming.

We take a very different approach by becoming the architect of their RIA. And so before an advisor even puts their name out into the market, we do a blind RFP to all of the custodians and most of the vendors that we know are going to be a good fit. We condense the time frame from about 12 to 18 months down to four to six months.

And then the rest of the advisor interest comes from media exposure. Mike (the Co-Founder) and I have been media spokespersons for the past 20 years, starting when we both were at Hightower at Chicago. We have a lot of PR and media connections, and we stay close to them and enjoy conversations with the press.

MAA: I would imagine that you have a lot of conversations and that nothing happens for months or years. Does such a major move have a long time frame?

Kimberly Papedis: It's actually pretty interesting when we intersect with advisors, it depends on where we intersect with them. When the custodian brings us an advisor that is stuck and says, I know I want to go independent; I just don't know how. That typically moves a little bit quicker.

Most of our Fusion clients will come to us and say, I think I want to move in 2 years. And they do believe that that's how long it's going to take. And we don't push them. We say that's fine, but let's put the project plan together for you. And the planning becomes so exciting that they end up accelerating their move.

You have to remember that our process is very different. If they were to call a recruiter, for example, a recruiter would place them in front of many different firms. A recruiter might include the platforms, custodians, independent broker-dealers, sometimes even other wirehouses, just so the advisor knows what else is out there.

We take an advisor and condense all of that. Usually within the first phone call, an advisor will say, oh, that's not what I want. We will do a process of elimination very quickly. And it may become apparent that they are on the road to launching their own RIA and they do want to be independent.

We've just condensed about six months' worth of conversations that they don't have to have.

MAA: When they do make the decision, is it sometimes spurred by a life event, such as a health issue, divorce, or they want to pursue hobbies?

Kimberly Papedis: Not the advisors that Fusion works with. There were some advisors, not a lot, but some advisors that really wanted more of a lifestyle business. They wanted to go independent and be able to golf when they wanted and they knew the book of business that would come with them that they could sustain for an amount of, you know, certain amount of time.

For the majority of our advisors, I would say almost 100% of them, it's a story about growth. They feel that they've been inhibited where they are, whether it's because they're in a captive environment or it's because there are certain types of products that they want to sell, that they cannot where they are, that is the catalyst for wanting to make a move.


KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
ken.boyd@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/ken-boyd-28616317/

Fusion Financial Partners: Building Independent RIA Businesses for Elite Advisors

The second factor is enterprise value. We run a pro forma for an advisor to show them what their enterprise value would be. Once they truly launch and become fully independent on their own ADV and they own their complete back office and operations with very little outsourcing, that becomes a very relevant point to them. And that also sometimes speeds up the process.

MAA: How do you calculate enterprise value?

Kimberly Papedis: it's very different than it is if you were in a captive environment. For example, if you were sunsetting out of one of the wirehouses, it would just be simply a percentage of your revenue.

In the independent space, it's all calculated based on EBITDA. And some of those multiples today are just outrageous.

MAA: Are private equity firms getting involved with advisor businesses?

Kimberly Papedis: Yes, that's been a trend in our industry for at least 10 years. It's why our model shifted to an acquisition model. The genesis of HighTower was W-2 employee advisors that were partners. Then they moved to 1099 contractors on our network platform. And then they moved to full acquisition.

PE firms started to get involved in that about 10 years ago, but there's so many more coming into the space. A week does not go by where a PE firm does not call Fusion and say, tell us a little bit about what you're doing in the RIA space. Even PE firms that have no interest or background in financial advisory.

MAA: What are the top few reasons that people want to go independent?

Kimberly Papedis: 15 years ago, when I was recruiting, people would always come to us about payout, right? We don't hear that anymore.

Now it's all about freedom, flexibility, and control of their own business and their own destiny. Whether that be a legacy, wanting to bring children into the business, or they want to continue growing, or they want to be able to sell and maximize their enterprise value.

And we are seeing larger and larger teams move.

MAA: Is there a particular piece of the tech stack that is a problem more than others when you are working on an advisor transition?

Kimberly Papedis: Again, it depends on when we intersect the team. Sometimes we intersect with teams that are already independent, and they want us to evaluate the office and their operations.

A lot of times they start with introductions to vendors and putting together what they consider the best. So they might look at Salesforce and love the platform.

Then they might look at Black Diamond or another vendor and say, well, I really like the salesperson from here and this gets me the reports that I need. And that's fine until a couple of months later, when you realize there's no adoption, because it's so difficult to use, or that the systems don't talk to one another.

We encourage teams to start with the data structure and who owns all of the data. Where is that data going to sit? And then how are you going to use your vendors and tools to extract that data?

KEN BOYD

Fusion Financial Partners: Building Independent RIA Businesses for Elite Advisors

MAA: What percentage of AUM do advisors retain when they move?

Kimberly Papedis: Our advisors retain about 98% when they move. Now, you have to you have to keep in mind our advisors' average AUM is a $1 billion or more. And we work with mega teams that could be considered platforms on their own.

So they're usually very well structured even in an employee environment. They're running a very tight ship.

I will say, even when I recruited from the wirehouses to the independent channel for both Raymond James and HighTower we would see advisors retain 85% of AUM and higher. Some of them even replicate higher because they uncover more assets during the move.

MAA: Tell me about your training programs.

Kimberly Papedis: We offer a program called Fusion Advisor Academy. We take an advisor through 90 days of training that teaches them about the landscape of independence.

The course explains all of the different models that they can choose from, and how that will affect their enterprise value. They learn how to recruit their own advisors and their own staff people on their team.

We're just educating them to decide before they enter into any conversations about truly making a move. And we offer that because teams that will come to us and say, I'm so overwhelmed.

I've heard from so many different people. There are so many vendors that have entered the space that make it easy to go independent in the past 10 years, but it becomes very convoluted. When they look at all of the different types of affiliations, do you want to be on your own ADV? Do you want to be on a joint ADV? Those all have massive implications, five, 10 years down the road.

So it all starts with education and training them about the landscape and then they learn from self-reflection and what makes sense to them. After that they typically come to us and say, this is what I don't want to do. Now how do you help me choose between joining a platform and going on my own?

MAA: Do you see a hesitation among founders as a big issue when it comes to succession planning? They just don't want to let go; they don't want to think about their own mortality.

Kimberly Papedis: We do see that. That's always been an issue in our space. And it's interesting because financial advisors are planners. And some of them are actually coaching their own business owner clients to have a successor.

And a lot of times advisors won't think of it until a client brings it up and says, look, you've been my advisor for 20-something years. We're the same age, and I'm about to retire. What happens when you retire?

And then it becomes the question of, well, what should I do? If they're in a wirehouse, they do have the option to take the sunset plan, or whatever internal succession planning they have.

But economically, that is usually not the best thing to do. So it's tough for them. They have to identify someone who can actually take over the business and it should be a two to three to four-year transition rather than saying here's a

KEN BOYD

Fusion Financial Partners: Building Independent RIA Businesses for Elite Advisors

junior advisor, and I hope you like working with them.

That's really tough because the clients have trusted you as the advisor for many, many years and believe you provide sage advice, and here you have someone brand new coming into the industry.

The ones that really work are the ones that create a team that will provide advice years into the future. They create systems, processes, and develop people as well. But it has to be bigger than yourself as a financial advisor if it's going to continue beyond you.

MAA: I saw the article about the advisor breakaway that brought $5 billion in AUM. Could you comment on that transaction?

Kimberly Papedis: It's a two-partner, two-person team, and they're based in Boston and also on the West Coast. They replicated very quickly, and they had almost 100% of their assets within six weeks of making the change.

They're just a massive machine. They run their business very efficiently. The key was that they were a very efficient team to begin with. And so even though they were sitting in an employee setting, they were truly already running like an independent team with very little reliance on their back office.

There were a lot of frustrations, and their business had outgrown the wirehouse model. And they knew it. So when they made the decision to move, they did it correctly.

We created an extensive plan with them. We were able to take the pain and pressures of doing all of the due diligence off their plate to allow them to continue to grow and to serve their clients.

At the end of the day, the advisor is always the one that makes the decisions. We're just doing the gathering of the information and present it in a digestible form so that they can focus on their business with their clients.

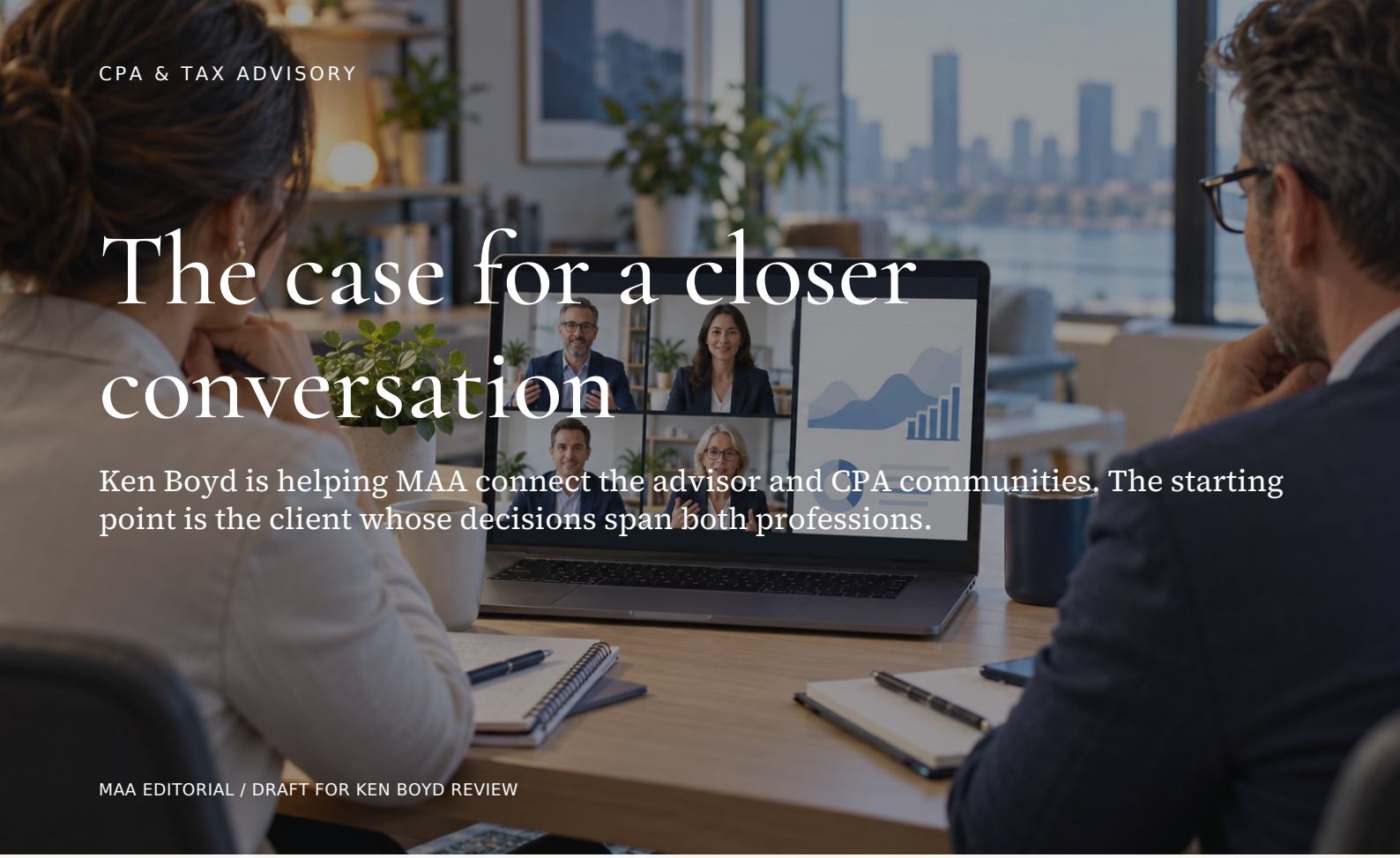
MAA: Kimberly, this has been great. Is there anything I haven't asked that you'd like to bring up?

Kimberly Papedis: We just recently launched our Fusion UK division, and we also just launched Fusion Continuum. So for the last I would say five teams that we've launched, we actually stay on with them help them run their back office.

We help them own as much of that as possible because it's directly related to enterprise value. There are some things that a team has to outsource, and that just makes the most sense for them to do. But the more that they can own the data, that's a direct increase in their enterprise value, which is what we help them do.

I think we're very different than other consultants because many consultants come in, consult, and they walk away. We consult, but then we stay on and have to justify those decisions that we helped the advisors make.


Time. On your terms.
Private aviation, personally considered.
PRIVATE AVIATION
For more information, contact the Modern American Advisor
Private Members Club | members.modernamericanadvisor.com
FICTIONAL BRAND • DESIGN PROOF ONLY



The case for a closer conversation

Ken Boyd is helping MAA connect the advisor and CPA communities. The starting point is the client whose decisions span both professions.

MAA EDITORIAL / DRAFT FOR KEN BOYD REVIEW

EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION / NOT A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE MAA WEBINAR

A business owner considering a sale may need advice about the transaction, the tax consequences and what the proceeds will mean for the family's future. Those questions arrive together, even when the professionals answering them work in different firms. For the client, the usefulness of the advice depends partly on how well those professionals communicate.

That is the thinking behind a closer relationship between Modern American Advisor's advisory audience and the CPA community. Ken Boyd, our Editor-in-Chief, has been developing the editorial conversation and approaching experienced CPA partners for our webinar program. His recent discussions highlight the overlap between advisors, accountants and attorneys serving business owners, trusts, estates and clients with more complex needs.

The opportunity begins with understanding each other's work. An advisor may recognize a change in a client's plans before it appears in the annual tax information. A CPA may see cash-flow pressures, ownership changes or an approaching decision that deserves a wider planning conversation. An attorney may identify legal questions that change what either professional can sensibly recommend. With the client's permission, an earlier conversation can bring those different perspectives into the same decision.

A useful relationship needs more than an exchange of business cards. The professionals involved should understand who is responsible for each part of the work, what information can be shared and how the client will be kept informed. Introductions work best when there is a clear reason for them. The client should know why another specialist is being suggested and what happens next.

For independent advisory firms, that approach can extend the expertise available to a client without requiring every specialist to sit inside one business. It also creates a more demanding test of a professional network: can the people in it work together when the client needs them?

THE MAA WEBINAR

PCAOB QC 1000

From Requirements to Readiness

THURSDAY 12 NOVEMBER 2026

1 PM EASTERN / 10 AM PACIFIC / 6 PM UK

Responsiveness and professional boundaries deserve as much attention as the original introduction.

Ken is bringing that perspective into MAA's expanding CPA and Tax Advisory coverage. Our Independence issue also includes a conversation with Jeremy Holly of LPL that considers relationships between advisory firms and CPAs. These discussions give readers a way to compare different approaches while keeping the client's needs at the center.

Our planned November webinar gives the CPA community a focused reason to join that wider conversation. PCAOB QC 1000: From Requirements to Readiness is scheduled for Thursday, November 12, 2026, at 1 p.m. Eastern, 10 a.m. Pacific and 6 p.m. UK. The intended discussion will cover the standard's purpose, implementation challenges and practical experience from firms preparing for it.

QC 1000 concerns the quality-control systems of PCAOB-registered public accounting firms. The PCAOB lists an effective date of December 15, 2026, with requirements to implement and operate a system depending on a firm's engagements. It should not be presented as a blanket requirement for every CPA practice. The final agenda and confirmed speakers will be published with registration details.

The wider ambition is to make the connection between these professions more useful throughout the year. Good editorial can help each audience understand the other's priorities. Webinars can give practitioners a place to compare experience and ask better questions. The measure of success is whether those conversations help professionals work more effectively around the client.

THE INTENDED CONVERSATION

From the standard to the practical questions

01 The standard’s purpose

02 Implementation challenges

03 Experience from firms preparing

PROOF HOLD Registration link and final speakers to be added. No CPE credit or regulator participation is promised.

QC 1000 standard and current effective date



KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
ken.boyd@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/ken-boyd-28616317/

The drive and the tools to go independent

By Ken Boyd

The Modern American Advisor team spoke with dozens of professionals at Future Proof in California last month. It's become clear that if advisors have the drive to go independent, they can find the support to make the transition.

This issue includes interviews with advisors and experts who can make independence a reality for those who want the freedom.

Humanity Lab's Dimple Shah explains how her company's unique AI workforce solution makes AI implementation simple for advisors.

EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION / FICTIONAL MODEL

The support behind the move

The issue's conversations with the people helping advisors make independence real.

Matt Ackermann and Becca Zophin, two marketing veterans from Integrated Partners, presented their system for helping advisors make a smooth transition to independence.

Ira Ravitz discussed why he left the wirehouse environment to serve clients more effectively.

You'll see additional content related to independence throughout the issue. Thanks for reading this month!

Inside this issue

Dimple Shah / AI workforce and operations

Matt Ackermann & Becca Zophin / transition support and growth

Ira Ravitz / serving clients as an independent advisor



DR SARAH MCLAUGHLIN
Contributor
sarah.mclaughlin@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/sarahmmc/

From Wirehouse to RIA

The journey of the breakaway advisor, and the professional identity that follows.

BY DR SARAH MCLAUGHLIN
Behavioral & Socioeconomic Insights Contributor
LinkedIn



EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION

DR SARAH MCLAUGHLIN

From Wirehouse to RIA

Dr Sarah McLaughlin

The move towards independence is accelerating. Last year, more than a quarter of wirehouse advisors (26.4%) entered the Registered Investment Advisor (RIA) channel, marking a pivotal shift in US wealth management. Yet, the headline figures tell only part of the story.

Every one of these moves begins as a deeply personal decision. Consider the moment you think about leaving your wirehouse. This signals a move towards greater autonomy, flexibility, and a client-centric approach. However, personally, it may not feel purely strategic. Instead, it may be filled with mixed emotions such as excitement and anxiety, and a sense of stepping into the unfamiliar. What seems like a business decision is also a significant change in professional identity.

To make sense of the move towards independence, I draw on sociologist Helen Ebaugh's Role Exit Theory. This theory explains how people step away from roles that once defined them and actively build new ones, while still carrying elements of their past with them. The journey to a new role is a staged process that begins with doubt, moves through a decisive break, and culminates in the reconstruction of a new identity. As we will see, the move from a wirehouse to an independent RIA closely follows this pattern.

Stage 1: The Emergence of Doubts

The move to independence isn't typically a sudden choice. It is usually a gradual process which begins with a sense of doubt, and this quiet doubt is becoming a bigger industry shift. Over the past two decades, the RIA model has more than tripled, reaching 21,669 firms by 2024, overseeing approximately $146 trillion.

As the RIA model expands, the distribution of power is also changing. By 2027, wirehouses are projected to control just over a quarter of industry assets, a significant drop from their 50%+ market share in 2005. But industry transformation does not happen overnight. It begins with individual decisions to question the status quo. This reflects Ebaugh's first stage of role exit, in which individuals begin to question a role once taken for granted.

Rarely triggered by a single event, this stage is marked by a gradual buildup of minor inconsistencies, such as conflicts between institutional rules and personal values, that slowly undermine one's sense of identity.

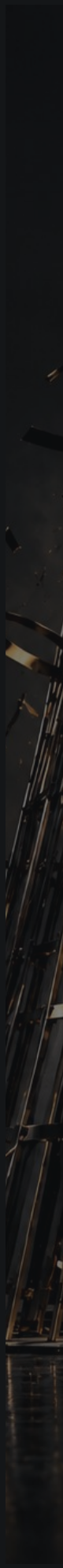
Predictably, the primary motivation for moving to RIA status is greater autonomy, and the decision to move is often deliberate rather than impulsive. Almost half of recently independent advisors report spending one to three years deciding, reflecting a thoughtful, high-stakes choice about their clients, their business, and their future professional identity.

In the wirehouse model, identity is mainly inherited, with the brand providing resources and legitimacy. As soon as you begin to question the firm, you also question your own standing. As that confidence declines, you may start to seek alternatives.

Stage 2: Seeking Alternatives -The Break and the Loss of Institutional Anchoring

The decision to go independent marks a turning point, and whilst this is decisive and empowering, it is also a rupture. It is a breakaway from both an organisation and a system of meaning. In Ebaugh's framework, this moment represents a decisive reorientation that redefines the individual's relationship to their former role. This is where contemplation turns into action, and a new direction takes shape.

At this stage, you move away from the built-in credibility of big institutions and start standing



REFERENCE REVIEW: author wording retained; dated notes and corrections retained in the review appendix.

DR SARAH MCLAUGHLIN

From Wirehouse to RIA

on your own. You are still regulated, still accountable, but no longer buffered by the brand and bureaucracy of a wirehouse.

However, independence doesn't mean standing alone. Many advisors look for new forms of scaffolding to support their move. According to Schwab survey data, advisors considering independence are more likely to join or affiliate with an existing RIA (44%) than create their own firm (31%). In practice, independence is rarely built from scratch, it is more often developed through new partnerships that replace, rather than remove, institutional support.

Becoming independent brings both freedom and disruption. The institutional scaffolding disappears, and with it, an inherited sense of certainty. Leaving is the first step, yet the real challenge begins as you build credibility and reconstruct your identity without your former company's backing.

Stage 3: The Turning Point - Rebuilding Legitimacy and the Work of Identity Reconstruction

Ebaugh's theory suggests that leaving a role isn't complete until you actively develop a new identity that both feels consistent to you and appears credible to others. During this phase, advisors reinterpret and reframe their past, deciding what to carry forward and what to leave behind.

This reconstruction is closely tied to what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu terms 'capitals' (see July's edition of Modern American Advisor for more on Bourdieu and the Great Wealth Transfer). Capitals are the resources advisors accumulate and use to build credibility and succeed in their new role. Successful transitions depend on:

Social capital – strong, trust-based client relationships.

Symbolic capital – reputation and perceived expertise.

Cultural capital – the ability to signal sophistication to high-net-worth clients.

These dynamics are reflected in industry data. Client retention in the RIA channel has remained high, at around 97% over the last decade, highlighting the importance of relationships over institutions.

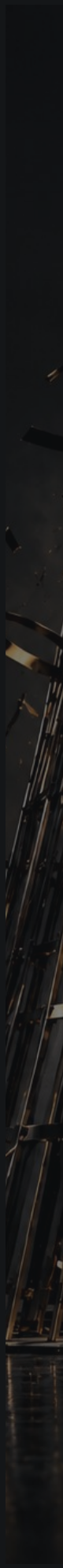
At the same time, client expectations are becoming more demanding. Research suggests more than half (66%) of high-net-worth investors want more personalised advice, while 46% are considering changing or adding advisory relationships. Independence, therefore, requires not just continuity, but active differentiation.

At this stage, it becomes necessary to ask who can succeed in this environment. Advisors with strong pre-existing capital, particularly relational trust and reputation, may be better positioned to make the move to independence more viable.

Stage 4: Performing the Independent Self

In the final stage of role exit, you don't just become independent, you have to show it. Without a firm's brand behind them, how advisers are perceived becomes a core part of their business. Perception is an asset, credibility must be built, and visibility converted into trust.

The story behind the move to independence plays a central role in this. Your story isn't merely a marketing tool, it serves to establish credibility without a brand, shape client perceptions of the transition, and define your new professional identity. This involves taking



REFERENCE REVIEW: author wording retained; dated notes and corrections retained in the review appendix.

DR SARAH MCLAUGHLIN

From Wirehouse to RIA

control of the narrative by explaining why you left, what you stand for, and how you are different. This will shape whether clients see independence as progress or risk. The decision may be framed as morally driven, either to better serve clients' interests or to offer more comprehensive advice. When told well, this narrative reassures clients, reinforces continuity, and strengthens trust at exactly the moment it matters most.

As more advisors go independent, standing out becomes harder, especially given that there are over 300,000 financial advisors in the US for clients to choose from. Performance is therefore not optional, it is competitive differentiation, and if you fail to actively perform independence, you risk becoming invisible.

Beyond Exit – Independence as an Ongoing Project

The move to independence isn't just a break from the wire house. It is also a reshaping of how advisors work, think, and define themselves every day. What starts as a role exit quickly becomes a role expansion.

Independent RIAs don't just advise. They run businesses, set strategy, and build brands. In effect, they take on a portfolio of roles that were once distributed across a larger organisation. Sociologists refer to this as the 'entrepreneurial self', whereby individuals operate as their own enterprise, carrying both the upside and the risk. For example, as autonomy increases, so does exposure. What the wirehouse once absorbed, such as commercial uncertainty and reputational risk, is now owned by the advisor.

The reality is more complex than industry narratives suggest. Independence brings freedom, but it also demands constant decision-making, visibility, and accountability. In terms of role exit, the transition never fully ends, as newly independent advisors must continue to rebuild and reaffirm their new identity. The move to independent RIA is not just a new way of working. It's a new way of being.

If you are willing to do that work, the transition offers the rare opportunity to build a business and a professional identity on your own terms, and a powerful opportunity to shape a career that is authentically yours. As role exit theory makes clear, the real achievement lies not only in leaving the wirehouse, but also the ongoing work to build an identity that is fully your own and is strong enough to withstand challenges.

Sources

https://advizorpro.com/post/advisor-channel-migration-analysis

https://www.sec.gov/data-research/statistics-data-visualizations/investment-adviser-statistics

https://riabiz.com/a/2024/1/3/rias-remain-wirehouse-kryptonite-in-2024-and-by-2027-jp-morgan-merrill-wells-and-ubs-will-see-market-share-tailspin-rias-the-obvious-culprits-cerulli-data-shows

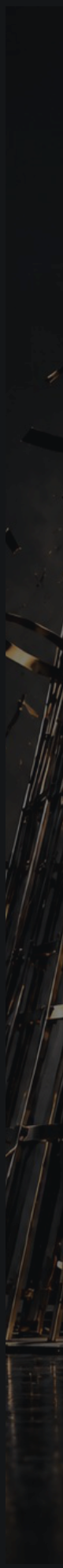
https://www.cerulli.com/reports/us-ria-marketplace-2024

https://www.aboutschwab.com/supported-independence-study-2024

https://www.aboutschwab.com/supported-independence-study-2024

https://content.schwab.com/web/retail/public/about-schwab/2024-Charles-Schwab-RIA-Benchmarking-Study.pdf

https://www.pwc.com/us/en/industries/financial-services/asset-wealth-management/high-net-worth-investor.html



MODERN AMERICAN ADVISOR

SOCIETY, WEALTH & ADVICE CONTRIBUTORS PANEL

Modern American Advisor is bringing together sociologists, social scientists and researchers to give socioeconomic issues a more thoughtful, evidence-led voice in financial advice. We translate insight on inequality, opportunity, family, culture, work, ageing and social justice into conversations that reach the people and institutions shaping financial decisions.

If you are interested in joining our exclusive contributors panel, please email our CEO, Alex.Sullivan@themodernamericanadvisor.com

REFERENCE REVIEW: author wording retained; dated notes and corrections retained in the review appendix.



MICHAEL WILLGRASS
Contributor
michael.willgrass@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: uk.linkedin.com/in/michaelwillgrass

The freedom that matters

Why independence is really about owning your growth.

BY MICHAEL WILLGRASS
Guest contributor, Myrnd
LinkedIn

EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION

MICHAEL WILLGRASS

The freedom that matters

Every conversation about going independent focuses on the wrong freedom.

Advisors weigh the payout grid. The technology stack. Whether they can keep their book. Whether the new firm's compliance team will be lighter than the last one. These are real questions. None of them is the one that decides whether independence makes you wealthy or just makes you self-employed.

The freedom that matters is this. As a true independent, you control how clients find you. In an employed seat, you never will.

That single difference is worth more than every other reason to break away combined. And almost nobody leads with it.

What Independence Is For

Independence gets sold as an escape. Freedom from the mothership. Freedom from the grid. Freedom from a compliance department that says no to everything.

That framing sets the bar too low. Escaping something is not the same as building something.

I spent seven years building a wealth management practice inside a large UK advice network. It was a good place to build. Brand, infrastructure, compliance cover, a proposition to take to market. A network gives you a great deal, and I would not have started any other way.

But a network also shows you exactly where your control ends. I could move fast on the things that were mine to decide, and I felt the drag every time something ran up against the framework I operated within. That contrast taught me the most valuable lesson of my career. The parts of the business that grew fastest were the parts where I owned the decision outright. And the single most important decision any advisor makes, the one that determines everything downstream, is how they win clients.

Independence, done right, is decision speed on the things that matter most. Client acquisition is top of that list.

Speed Is the Whole Game

Let me make this concrete, because it is easy to talk about speed in the abstract and miss how decisive it actually is.

A tax change lands on a Monday morning. A new contribution limit, an estate threshold that shifts, a rule that suddenly makes a whole cohort of savers rethink their plans. Every advisor in the country reads the same headline at 9 am.

An independent advisor can have a campaign live by the end of that day. A landing page speaking directly to the change. Ads pointed at the people it affects. A clear message, in market, while the topic is still hot and the phones are ringing everywhere.

The advisor in a restricted seat cannot. They can draft something, submit it, and wait. Compliance pre-approval on the copy. A queue behind everyone else's requests. By the time it clears, the moment has passed and the story has moved on.

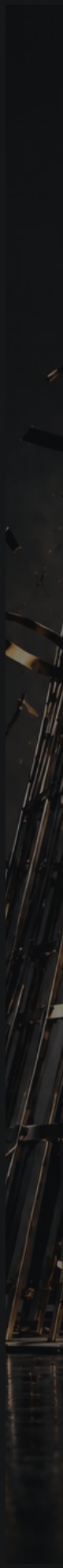
That is not a small operational nuisance. That is the difference between owning a moment and reading about it afterward. Markets and tax rules hand advisors these openings several times a year, and the independent captures them while the employed advisor watches them go by. Multiply that across a career and it is enormous.

Speed is not a nice-to-have of independence. It is the point of it.

The Thing Employed Advisors Can Never Do

Here is what a wirehouse or captive advisor cannot do, no matter how good they are.

They cannot run their own client acquisition. They cannot set a marketing budget and spend it how they choose. They cannot buy leads, run ads, build a referral engine, or test a new channel without permission that usually never



MICHAEL WILLGRASS

The freedom that matters

comes. Their growth is handed to them, or it comes from their own network of contacts, and when that network is tapped, growth stops dead.

There is a subtler point buried in this too. An independent does not just get to buy leads. They get to choose who they buy from. You can vet a source, run a test batch, measure exactly what it delivers, and walk away the moment it underperforms. You are the customer, and you hold the whip. An employed advisor takes whatever arrangement the firm has struck, from whichever provider the firm has chosen, on whatever terms were negotiated over their head. Same activity on paper. Completely different amount of control.

I have watched brilliant advisors plateau for exactly these reasons. Not because they ran out of skill. Because they ran out of the one input they were never allowed to control.

A genuinely independent advisor has no such ceiling. You decide the budget. You decide the channel. You decide the supplier. You own the pipeline. Want more clients next quarter? That becomes a decision you can actually make, rather than a hope you carry into the office every morning.

That is the freedom worth breaking away for. Everything else is administration.

Why This Is the Freedom That Builds Value

The independence conversation always turns to enterprise value in the end. Everyone wants to build a business worth selling rather than a job that ends the day they retire.

Owning your growth is what makes the difference. Nothing else comes close.

Think about what a buyer is really paying for. Not your charm. Not your relationships, because those walk out the door with you. They are buying the probability that the business keeps growing after you step back. A firm whose new clients arrive through the founder's personal network is a job with good cash flow. A firm whose new clients arrive through a system anyone can run is an asset.

You cannot build that system in an employed seat. The system belongs to the firm, not to you. Independence is the precondition for owning the growth engine, and the growth engine is the thing that gets valued.

This is the part the transition conversation skips. Going independent does not create enterprise value on its own. It creates the permission to build it. What you do with that permission is everything.

What Advisors Underestimate

Advisors weighing the move underestimate one thing.

They assume their growth will carry on automatically once they are free. Same clients, same referrals, same word of mouth, minus the grid deduction. More money, same life.

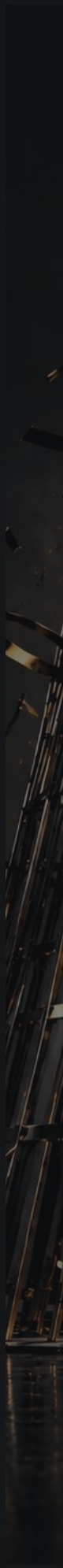
It rarely plays out that cleanly. Referrals are wonderful, but they are unpredictable, cannot be scheduled, and capped by the size of your existing base. They cannot be turned up because you decided this is a growth year. An advisor who breaks away and leans solely on referrals has simply swapped a salary ceiling for a referral ceiling. Freer, yes. More valuable, not necessarily.

The advisors who thrive after independence are the ones who treat their new freedom as a mandate. A mandate to build the exact thing their old firm never let them build. A repeatable, controllable way to put themselves in front of the right people at the moment those people are looking for help.

That is the real work of independence. Not the paperwork of leaving. The engineering of growth.

Doing It Properly

I learned this the hard way, over several years and a fair amount of my own money. Client acquisition done badly is a money pit. Done



MICHAEL WILLGRASS

The freedom that matters

properly, it is the most powerful asset an independent advisor can own.

The difference comes down to a handful of principles that hold whatever the channel.

Pay for outcomes, not activity. A name is worth nothing. A click is worth nothing. A qualified person sitting in front of you, ready to talk, is worth a great deal. Build everything around the outcome you actually want.

Insist on exclusivity. If a prospect is talking to three other firms the same week, you are not having a conversation. You are in a bidding war you never agreed to enter.

Know your numbers before you scale. What does it cost to generate a meeting? What share convert? What is the average case worth? Once you know those three numbers, growth stops being a mood and becomes arithmetic. Spend more, get more, predictably. That predictability is exactly what independence was supposed to buy you.

From Practice to Platform

Everything I have argued here, I went on to build a company around.

After years of building inside a network and seeing precisely where its ceiling sat, I co-founded what is now one of the largest advisor matching platforms in the UK. We are bringing it to the United States this year under Alynd Financial.

The premise is the argument above, turned into a product. Advisors need to own their growth. Most have never been shown how to do it properly. And the version of lead generation the market sold them was broken from the start. Shared lists. Unqualified names. Paying for the possibility of a conversation rather than the conversation itself.

So we built the opposite. No lists. No selling the same person to five firms. We charge for an attended meeting, exclusive to one advisor, with assets verified before it ever reaches the diary. If the meeting does not happen, we do not get paid. Every incentive points the same way.

The reason a model like that delivers is control. An advisor who owns their growth can plug in a channel like this, choose it on their own terms, set the dial, and scale it. An advisor whose growth belongs to someone else cannot. That is the whole difference, in one decision.

The Real Question

If you are weighing a move to independence, ask a sharper question than everyone else is asking.

Not "will I make more per client once the grid deduction disappears." That is the small version.

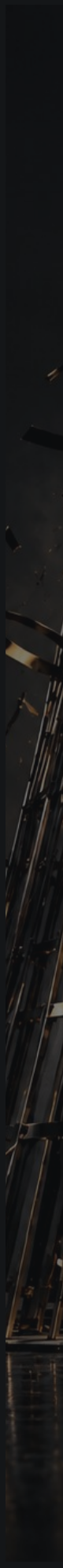
Ask instead: once I am free to control my own growth, what am I actually going to build with that freedom?

Because that is the whole game. Independence is not the achievement. It is the starting line. The advisors who understand that go on to build businesses with real, transferable value. The ones who do not simply become self-employed at a slightly better payout, carrying the same growth ceiling they always had, now with their own compliance headache bolted on.

The freedom to control your growth is the single most valuable thing independence gives you.

The only question that matters is whether you use it.

Michael Willgrass spent seven years building a wealth management practice in the UK before co-founding Trusted Advisor, one of the UK's largest advisor matching platforms. He is now co-founder of Alynd Financial, which brings the same verified, exclusive appointment model to the US market.





PETER MCGRATTY
Contributor
peter.mcgratty@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/petermcgratty

Is independence rebuilding the beast it escaped?

Industry Insider asks how the independent channel can gain scale while preserving its purpose.

BY PETER MCGRATTY

Guest contributor | Industry Insider

LinkedIn

EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION

PETER MCGRATTY

Is independence rebuilding the beast it escaped?

There is a quiet tension building inside the independent advisory market.

For years, the story was simple. Advisors broke away from the wirehouses, escaped the sales culture, embraced fiduciary principles, and built client-first firms on their own terms.

That was the independent RIA dream.

But dreams mature. Markets consolidate. Founders age. Private equity arrives. Platforms grow. Menus expand. And suddenly the independent channel starts to face an uncomfortable question:

Has parts of the RIA market begun recreating the very model it once escaped?

The old breakaway movement was powered by conviction. Advisors wanted freedom. They wanted to sit on the same side of the table as the client. They wanted to build businesses where advice came before product, planning came before distribution, and relationships came before institutional targets.

That movement created one of the most attractive segments in American financial services.

Naturally, capital followed.

Today, large consolidators have scale, capital, technology, recruiting power, investment menus, private market access and brand leverage. Some have become formidable businesses. But scale always comes with a question: scale for whom?

Scale can improve client outcomes. It can deepen planning, broaden access, reduce administrative burden and professionalize operations.

But scale can also become the polite word for margin expansion, asset gathering, product pushing and preparing the business for the next transaction.

That is where the industry needs to be honest with itself.

The traditional independent RIA model arguably stood on four legs.

First: fiduciary, unconflicted, client-first advice.

Second: a manageable client load, allowing advisors to know clients properly and act proactively, not reactively.

Third: comprehensive, ongoing financial planning, not a one-off plan used as a sales tool.

Fourth: serious investment management, delivered with competence, discipline and genuine alignment.

When those four legs are intact, the model works. When one or two are weakened, the stool starts to wobble.

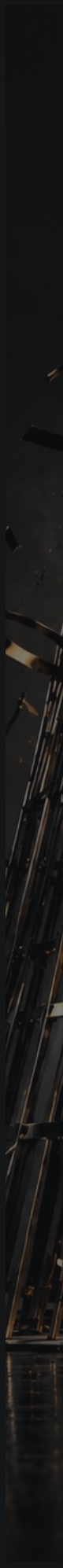
And that wobble is starting to show.

Some larger firms now look, sound and market themselves like independent RIAs while operating with values that may feel closer to the institutional models many advisors originally left behind. Not in every case. Not universally. But often enough for the market to notice.

Product shelves can become bloated. Planning can become front-loaded. Advisors can become overloaded. Client service can become reactive. “Choice” can become a sales tactic. And “thousands of models” can sound less like investment excellence and more like: tell us what you want to buy, and we will find a way to provide it.

That may be commercial. It may even be clever. But is it advice?

The danger is not that large firms exist. The danger is that clients cannot easily tell the difference between a values-led independent RIA and a scaled acquisition machine wearing the same fiduciary clothing.



PETER MCGRATTY

Is independence rebuilding the beast it escaped?

That creates a brand problem for the entire independent channel.

If everyone calls themselves independent, client-first and planning-led, the words start to lose meaning. The good firms then have to work harder to explain not just what they do, but what they refuse to become.

This is where the next industry divide may emerge.

Not wirehouse versus RIA.

Not active versus passive.

Not small versus large.

But values-led scale versus transaction-led scale.

That distinction matters.

Because smaller RIAs face a genuine competitive problem. The large platforms can offer broader investment capabilities, deeper operations, compliance infrastructure, private markets access, back-office support and slicker client-facing resources. A $300 million firm may have better values than a $30 billion platform, but values alone do not answer every client question.

Clients still expect sophistication. They expect access. They expect responsiveness. They expect modern technology. They expect planning depth. They expect their advisor to know more, do more and deliver more than ever before.

So the independent advisor has a challenge: how do you stay independent without looking underpowered?

That is the battleground.

For many firms, the answer will not be selling to the highest bidder. It will be finding ways to borrow scale without surrendering identity.

That may mean outsourcing investment management. It may mean shared back-office support. It may mean partnering with larger values-aligned RIAs. It may mean using advisor-serving-advisor platforms. It may mean joining communities that help independents compete without forcing them into a roll-up machine.

The ecosystem is also choosing sides. Recruiters, custodians, technology providers and service firms often prefer one large client over twenty smaller ones. That is understandable commercially, but it changes the landscape. The independent advisor who once relied on a broad support ecosystem may find that ecosystem increasingly built around the needs of the biggest players.

That is why independent RIAs may need to "circle the wagons" — not in a defensive or nostalgic way, but strategically.

The next phase of independence will require collaboration, brand clarity and shared infrastructure. It will require firms to explain why their values are different, then prove they can still deliver a competitive client proposition.

Succession is another pressure point.

A decade ago, many advisors did not want to sell. They had just escaped the big institutions. They were making more money, enjoying more freedom and serving clients in a way they believed in.

Now many of those same advisors are ten or fifteen years older. The question is no longer theoretical. It is immediate.

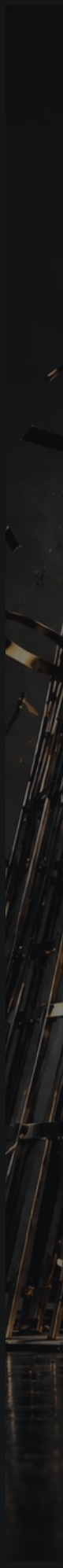
What happens to the clients?

What happens to the staff?

What happens to the family?

What happens if the founder gets ill, dies suddenly, or simply wakes up one morning and realizes they are done?

Too many firms still rely on loose handshake arrangements or vague continuity plans. That is



PETER MCGRATTY

Is independence rebuilding the beast it escaped?

not good enough. A solo or small ensemble advisory firm is a valuable business, but it is also a wasting asset if transition is handled poorly. Clients drift. Staff panic. Families are left trying to manage something they do not understand.

A real continuity plan is not bureaucracy. It is client protection.

Succession is even more complicated. Most advisors underestimate the time involved. They imagine they can decide to retire, find a buyer, sign a deal and move on.

In reality, the transition can take years. Investment platforms need migrating. Back-office systems need aligning. Client data needs transferring. Most importantly, clients need to trust the successor advisor.

That does not happen overnight.

The smartest advisors will treat outsourcing as a stepping stone to retirement. Move the investment platform first. Align operations. Create continuity. Then, when the advisor is ready to step back, the only remaining transition is the human one: who takes over the relationship?

That is far better than waking up at 63, 68 or 72 and trying to solve everything under pressure.

This is where the industry needs to get more adult.

“Die with my boots on” is not a succession strategy. It is a risk factor.

For clients, it is dangerous. For families, it is unfair. For employees, it is destabilizing. For regulators, it is increasingly unacceptable.

The irony is that the best independent advisors often care so deeply about clients that they avoid having the difficult conversation about what happens when they are no longer there. But that conversation is itself part of client-first advice.

The market is moving quickly now. Consolidators are not going away. Private equity is not going away. Large platforms will continue to grow. Some will do it well. Some will drift toward the old institutional habits, with new branding and better websites.

The independent community has a choice.

It can complain about consolidation while slowly losing ground.

Or it can define a sharper, more modern version of independence.

One that says: yes, we are fiduciary. Yes, we are planning-led. Yes, we know our clients. Yes, we are values-driven. But also: yes, we have institutional-quality investment access. Yes, we have operational depth. Yes, we have continuity. Yes, we can compete.

That is the future worth building.

The next great RIA story may not be the biggest roll-up. It may be the network of serious independent firms that find a way to scale without selling their soul.

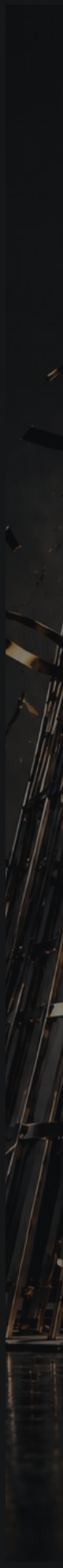
Because independence should not mean being small, under-resourced or strategically isolated.

But scale should not mean becoming another sales institution in fiduciary clothing.

That is the line the industry now has to walk.

And it is getting thinner.

Agree, disagree or want to respond? Send comments to editor@modernamericanadvisor.com.





OLA ABDUL
Contributor
ola.abdul@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: uk.linkedin.com/in/olaabdul

Independence was never the finish line

Operating freedom depends on the infrastructure behind the advisor.

BY OLA ABDUL / FUNDMENT

Guest contributor | Fundment

LinkedIn



For twenty years, the case for going independent was simple. Advisors wanted ownership, better economics, and control of the relationships they built. The RIA model delivered: they left institutions they didn't own and built firms around their own convictions.

That first generation succeeded. The question now is what comes after it.

Ownership and economics still matter. But independence is increasingly about something the first wave underestimated: operating freedom. Not just who owns the firm, but how it works: how portfolios are implemented, where AI sits and how much of the advisor's day goes to clients rather than plumbing.

An advisor can be fully independent on paper while remaining quietly constrained in practice.

Fidelity's recent decision to require existing RIAs to maintain at least $100 million on its custody platform by June 2027 brings this tension into sharp focus. The threshold applies to assets held at Fidelity, not a firm's total AUM, potentially leaving otherwise successful firms searching for a new custodian.

Fidelity is entitled to make its own commercial decisions. But an RIA can control its business and client relationships while remaining dependent on another institution's priorities. An RIA's independence should not depend on whether a custodian considers the firm large enough to serve.

Many advisors leave an integrated institution only to reassemble one by hand: a custodian, portfolio management system, CRM, onboarding tools, reporting, billing, and a growing collection of AI point solutions. Each piece may be excellent. Together, however, they can equate to a second or third job.

Independence also means making consequential choices about the infrastructure that will now sit behind you: onboarding, compliance, account opening, asset transfers, trade implementation and daily administration. When systems don't connect, firms compensate with manual work and additional headcount, making fragmentation central to the operating model.

The cost extends beyond software licenses. Every hour spent moving information between systems or clearing exceptions is an hour not spent winning clients, deepening relationships, or building the firm.

The usual response is to call this the price of freedom, but that's a misrepresentation. Independence shouldn't require the advisor to become a systems integrator, and it shouldn't mean isolation either. The next generation of infrastructure needs to deliver both choice and coherence.

OLA ABDUL / FUNDMENT

Independence was never the finish line

This is where custody comes in, and where I'd draw a distinction.

Many platforms promise integration. Look closely, though, and much of it is really just separate systems wired together after the fact. The seams show. Data must be reconciled across them, and advisors move between interfaces designed around different workflows.

A core platform built as one system is different. When custody, operations, implementation, data, and intelligence share the same architecture, onboarding can connect directly to account opening. AI can draw on shared account and workflow data to identify issues and help determine the appropriate next step.

As client needs grow more sophisticated across lending and liquidity, cash management, private markets, tax-aware and personalized strategies, the old answer was another provider, workflow, and login. The better answer is to make more of those capabilities native.

Take lending, which we're building now. An advisor putting a line of credit in front of a client shouldn't have to move into a separate system and rekey everything because the credit sits with a bank. We're partnering with multiple banks to make it native. In practice, this means they provide the credit, but the account opening, data and workflow live where the advisor already manages the relationship. That creates a more consistent, seamless experience for both the client and the advisor.

And that matters for growth. Better infrastructure lets firms serve more clients without complexity rising in step, deepen existing relationships, broaden what they can offer, and create new sources of value as client needs evolve.

This isn't about rebuilding the wirehouse. Independent firms should stay free to choose the specialist managers, technology, and services that make them distinctive. The goal is institutional capability without institutional constraint.

AI raises the stakes. The first wave of wealth AI focused on individual productivity: meeting notes, summaries and information retrieval. Useful capabilities, but they do little to change how an advisory firm actually operates.

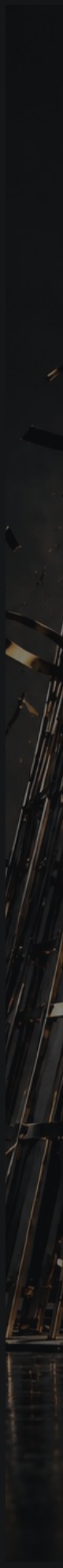
The bigger prize is intelligence connected to execution: a system that doesn't just flag a tax loss but understands the portfolio and stages a replacement for approval. It doesn't just report a stuck transfer but knows where it's stuck and moves it.

That takes data, operations, implementation and custody working as one environment. Intelligence is far more powerful when it's native to where action happens.

This is what we're building at Fundment. In the US, we will custody client assets ourselves as a FINRA approved self-clearing broker dealer and custodian, so accounts, assets, trading, and records sit on one proprietary platform, not introduced to someone else's. It's the same architecture more than 1,300 advisory firms rely on across the UK, from boutiques to national firms, built as one system from the ground up.

The first wave of independence gave advisors the freedom to leave an institution. The next should give them the infrastructure to build one.

Ola Abdul, Founder and CEO at Fundment



Invest in what moves the world.

A long-term perspective on a changing world.



TALVORN
REAL ASSETS

FICTIONAL BRAND • DESIGN PROOF ONLY



KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
ken.boyd@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/ken-boyd-28616317/

An AI workforce for the advisory firm

Dimple Shah on AI workflows, operational capacity and the advisor business.

BY KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
LinkedIn





EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION



KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
ken.boyd@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/ken-boyd-28616317/

An AI workforce for the advisory firm

Modern American Advisors interviewed Dimple Shah, Managing Director, Wealth at Humanity Labs.

MAA: Tax regulations are constantly changing, and here's the scenario I'll give you. The One Big Beautiful Bill has tax rules that change year to year, and some of those rules impact wealth management. How would the Humanity Labs' AI interact with somebody who, for example, is taking a required minimum distribution (RMD), and then the rules change? In that scenario, what would the AI help with?

Dimple Shah: One of the powers of the AI Workforce is that it starts at the end. And so in this example, it would be saying, okay, we want to execute RMDs. That would be the task of the AI Workforce to prepare that, whether or not it actually hits the button and does the task.

The distribution is a separate question, but let's say the AI Workforce takes the work all the way up so that the RMD is ready for execution, whether that's by the advisor or by someone in the home office.

The AI Workforce literally says: my job is to prepare this RMD. So now I've got to work backwards from that on all the work that has to occur at the RIA or at the wealth management platform to prepare that RMD, which includes checking the current tax rules.

I have to make sure that it's within the guidelines of what's allowed, check the age of the client, verify any distributions they've already taken, etc. Then I've got to actually prepare that distribution, which means, maybe I'm going to take a request that came into the advisor, an email that needs to go to the custodian.

All of that work today is literally facilitated by humans, every step of the way, right? But today what happens is that humans have to facilitate all of those steps.

Now information comes back from the custodian. We've got to check the information against all these databases, and now I've got to check it against the investor data. As data moves from one queue to the next, different humans apply validation requirements.

And so that is the work, and in this example of when an AI Workforce would do said work, it would say, okay, you've told me my job is to prepare an RMD for Miss Boyd? So I'm going to, and you've trained me on how to do that.

What are all the steps for the humans at the wealth management firm? What is the current way of executing that through humans and technology? And then the AI Workforce will say great, I'm going to do it the exact same way and get this RMD ready for you. At that point, the advisor can hit the send button or call the client if there's any follow-ups.

MAA: Is there a human check on the tax code that's driving the RMD amount? What's being relied on to come up with the right part of the tax code?

All of that work today is literally facilitated by humans, every step of the way, right? But today what happens is that humans have to facilitate all of those steps.



KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
ken.boyd@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/ken-boyd-28616317/

An AI workforce for the advisory firm

Dimple Shah: The answer depends on what process the firm uses, which is some combination of software and perhaps human judgment. With an AI Workforce as a starting point, it would be the same thing. This is the piece of software that the AI Workforce should validate against to check the most current tax code.

If there's questions about that, you could say, 'hey, AI Workforce, I want you to go validate what's in this database against the actual IRS tax code and go outside of our environment and look at it. We're worried that maybe some regulation just got approved last week. So go out and validate against what's been released by the IRS versus what's coming through in our software and make sure they're consistent.'

MAA: There was a really interesting quote on one of your blog posts. People are the integration layer between systems that don't talk to each other. Can you expand on that?

Dimple Shah: Today, if you think about the architecture of wealth management firms broadly speaking, you have what we describe as the ecosystem layer, which is where all the technology applications, software systems, AI native apps, custodian platforms, advisory platforms, CRMs, all of that sits at the ecosystem layer.

Then you have a workforce layer, which today is 100% human for the most part. And then you have the experience layer, which is 'how do our clients experience us as a firm', which is all around relationships, trust, judgment – the truly human work.

When you think about our industry, what's happened is that the ecosystem layer has ballooned and ballooned over time. And one of the biggest challenges of wealth management firms is that the vast majority of applications don't talk to each other.

And so tons of work goes on to integrate the data flows, and that's why we created data warehouses and data lakes to orchestrate the data that is moving across all of those systems.

So we have a different approach. There is an evergreen opportunity that wealth management firms are going to be solving for, which is: how do we get that ecosystem to be more integrated?

You can't let the work that has to go on at that level impede your ability to grow as a firm, to serve more clients, and to scale in disproportionate ways.

Therefore, a concept like the AI Workforce enables you to start accelerating the delivery of work and the scalability of your firm because we're working at the workforce layer, not at the ecosystem layer.

We're working on top of whatever you, as a wealth management firm, already have in place. The faster you swap things out and make things AI native, headless and integrated, the faster the AI Workforce is going to produce outcomes for

You can't let the work that has to go on at that level impede your ability to grow as a firm, to serve more clients, and to scale in disproportionate ways.

An AI workforce for the advisory firm

you. But it's not contingent on you having a perfectly orchestrated ecosystem in order to leverage the AI Workforce.

MAA: Can you please explain general intelligence and the shared memory layer?

Dimple Shah: This is the superpower of the AI Workforce. I'll take you through a little bit of the differentiation between agents and an AI Workforce because that is the unlock that enables an AI Workforce to create what we call general intelligence for a firm.

So if you think about what agents do, they operate at a task level. I'm sure you're using Claude, ChatGPT, and Gemini to assist you with writing or assist you with note-taking on interviews. At this point, the vast majority of RIAs are using what we call task or point solutions to accelerate productivity around a singular task.

Most of the point solution note takers, such as Wealth.com or Vanilla, are great. They all help with an individual task within a firm.

The power of the AI Workforce differs from an agent. An AI Workforce is a coordinated system of labor that has shared memory and shared context. And so whatever work you direct the AI Workforce at over time, all of that knowledge and memory begins compounding.

For example, you tell an AI Workforce to work on advisor onboarding. We understand how XYZ wealth management firm brings new advisors into the firm; we've taken it through all those systems. Now we want you to work on client onboarding.

It's the same AI Workforce with the same memory, the same shared context, the same shared understanding, that uses everything we learned about advisor onboarding and transitions.

Now we're going to apply it to client onboarding. So we already have all of this understanding of what's happening when bringing new advisors on. Now we're going to apply that to bringing new clients on.

Next we're going to apply that to trade supervision, portfolio creation, and meeting prep. As all of that knowledge and intelligence of the AI Workforce compounds, what you get down the line is the ability to then just tap into the AI Workforce.

The AI Workforce is proactively sharing insights with you regarding all the things that are going on in the firm. Let me give you an update on where we are with bringing new advisors into the firm, where we are with onboarding new clients, or how many assets have transitioned over.

The work today is distributed across an organization, and a management team has to spend a disproportionate amount of their time going group to group, looking at dashboards, reporting, and trying to discern all of this

Most of the point solution note takers, such as Wealth.com or Vanilla, are great. They all help with an individual task within a firm.

KEN BOYD

An AI workforce for the advisory firm

information to get a picture of what's happening at the firm.

That's the intelligence that gets created through the AI workforce over time as it gets exposed to more and more of what's happening at the firm.

MAA: Can you explain how you manage data security?

Dimple Shah: What accelerates our ability to work across firms is that we would never share any data or details on how the firm operates. We start to create advantages when the AI Workforce starts to understand how the business works. At the same time, we don't share firm data.

Think about these workflows. How are advisors generally onboarded into firms, and what systems are used across the industry? How are clients onboarded and offboarded, how wires are prepared, and how trades are supervised. Those are generic workflows, and different firms use different systems.

Generally, there's a set of steps we go through in order to execute those workflows. Once the AI Workforce is already trained up on how to complete a task, the workforce is just like an employee that's worked at another RIA down the street. Both have a base of knowledge to complete specific tasks.

A new employee says I worked on opening accounts for the past 4 years. Now I've come over to a different RIA. I'm going to bring that intelligence of the process to my new role. It's the same for the AI Workforce, and that's the part that's leverageable.

MAA: Who are your competitors? Is it big consulting firms or accounting firms?

Dimple Shah: We haven't seen anyone else specific in wealth management creating an AI Workforce. I think the closest comps we've seen are in other industries. One comp would be what Harvey has done in the legal space, or what Sierra is trying to do for customer service.

I think a lot of what we've seen in the wealth management space today is more the agentic solutions. So individual task and use-case-oriented, not a coordinated system that is delivered through an AI Workforce.

MAA: Is there some sort of capacity issue for you as an AI firm? Either the capacity of the AI Workforce to take on work or the capacity to create the AI Workforce?

Dimple Shah: No, and I think that's the beauty of the AI Workforce. At Humanity Labs, we have a human team of about 25 people and an AI Workforce of over 150 FTEs. And so the AI Workforce is what unlocks that ability to scale without the need to add staff.

That's the intelligence that gets created through the AI workforce over time as it gets exposed to more and more of what's happening at the firm.

KEN BOYD

An AI workforce for the advisory firm

The traditional way of growing is very human-reliant. One of the powers of the AI Workforce is that you scale exponentially because you don't have to add bodies every time you bring on new clients, for example.

MAA: And I hear about how AI systems are weighted. Is that an issue that impacts AI Workforce?

Dimple Shah: Weighting doesn't impact AI Workforce. Routing has a big part of what we do, which is a lot of the engineering or some portion of the engineering expertise on our team is really focused on.

Let's make sure we're routing the appropriate model to the appropriate task and therefore optimizing the efficiency of how work gets done.

That's part of the learning curve the world is going through. Management may decide that we want to unleash an AI solution to all of our employees, and now we've got this massive token bill.

How are they using AI? If they were using it to make their emails better, it didn't really give any productivity or capacity back to the firm.

We're trying to create fungible capacity for the firms that we serve so that the firm can use that fungible capacity to unlock growth in new and different ways. How do we deliver that efficiently? Part of that equation is let's make sure we're optimizing the delivery mechanism on the Humanity Labs side behind the scenes.

MAA: This has been fantastic. And is there anything that you wanted to say that I didn't ask about?

Dimple Shah: I really think the industry, broadly speaking, is sort of in the agentic world. A lot of the AI solutions being developed are agentic solutions. And they're great, right? Again, they speed up individual tasks.

What they don't do is create fungible capacity for the firm, which is the thing wealth management firms have always struggled with. We need more capacity to grow, to make our operations more efficient, to improve our service.

I think helping the industry wrap their head around the AI Workforce is a leapfrog strategy. You don't need to build agents and then have digital workers and then go to an AI Workforce. You go straight to the AI Workforce, and you get the thing you're actually looking for, which is fungible capacity so that we can scale and grow in a nonlinear way.

We need more capacity to grow, to make our operations more efficient, to improve our service.



KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
ken.boyd@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/ken-boyd-28616317/

Integrated Partners: Veteran Marketers Supporting Advisors

Matt Ackermann and Becca Zophin on autonomy, marketing and the support behind the move.

BY KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
LinkedIn



EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION

BECCA ZOPHIN



KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
ken.boyd@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/ken-boyd-28616317/

Integrated Partners: Veteran Marketers Supporting Advisors

Modern American Advisors interviewed Matt Ackermann, Chief Brand Officer, and Becca Zophin, Chief Marketing Officer, from Integrated Partners. Matt and Becca discuss why advisors go independent, why the decision can be difficult, and how Integrated Partners provides a great support system for the transition.

Why Advisors Go Independent

Matt explains the factors that drive the decision and why he views going independent as a huge leap of faith.

“They sit there at this moment, and they are in a captive environment. Most of the time, they're thinking about independence, first and foremost, from their client's perspective.

They want to be fiduciaries. They want to be able to offer best-in-breed products, best-in-breed services, and they're in an environment where they're often limited to what they can sell, what they can't sell, what they can offer, and the technology they can use.

And they're sitting in this environment wondering if there is a better way.”

Becca points out that autonomy is also a factor.

“Sometimes advisors reach a point where they feel boxed in by the way they’re expected to run their practice. We find advisors start reaching out when they have a vision of where they want their practice to go and what they want their practice to look like, but they’re just not sure how to connect those dots.”

An Emotional Decision

Change is difficult, and advisors must deal with uncertainty when they consider going independent.

Matt explains that: “The pain is pushing them out the door, but fear is keeping them in at the same time. The fear of the unknown is out there.

Matt explains the factors that drive the decision and why he views going independent as a huge leap of faith.



KEN BOYD
Editor-in-Chief
ken.boyd@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/ken-boyd-28616317/

Integrated Partners: Veteran Marketers Supporting Advisors

They know they need to go because it's best for their clients, but at the same time, man, I don't know what the unknown looks like out there.

So the biggest fear is I'm going to get trapped on a deserted island somewhere and have to do this all myself."

What Integrated Partners Offers Advisors

Matt believes that Integrated is an attractive place for entrepreneurial advisors that want to grow their business their way.

"They have this moment after they've finally decided, yes, I'm going to do it. I'm going to go independent. They have this moment now where they're like a free agent in baseball.

They have all these different options, all these different choices to pick from. And really the world is their oyster. They really want to build a business that's uniquely theirs. They get more and more attracted to coming to Integrated because there's so many different options, tools, and strategies. We really help them to build it their way."

According to Becca, Integrated's role is to take the advisor's vision and bring it to life by giving the advisor an execution plan.

"And not just from a marketing and branding standpoint. We look at the entire practice and figure out what needs to happen to get them where they want to go. Then we help put the right pieces in place, from the people and resources to the tools and support they need to execute."

Retaining Client Relationships

Client retention is a huge concern when advisors go independent. But, as Matt says, Integrated's support team helps advisors maximize client retention.

And they're sitting in this environment wondering if there is a better way."

KEN BOYD

Integrated Partners: Veteran Marketers Supporting Advisors

“The industry percentages are in the 80s. We're finding we're in the 95s and even higher. We have an incredible transition team that works really hard with the advisor.

Because, like what we were saying, it's like another fear that keeps them in, right? My clients aren't going to follow me. My assets aren't going to follow me. I'm stuck. What we find is that most clients are there to work with the advisor, not with the brand that's hanging above the door.

I always find that advisors are pleasantly surprised that such a high percentage is coming with them. We have a really clear process on how to do it.”

Making the Transition

New Integrated advisors are given a detailed execution plan when they decide to join the firm. Matt lays out the process.

“That moment when they hand in their letter of resignation, and then it's this race to gather up as many of the clients as possible before the phone calls start happening on the other side. Before that date, Becca implements a great marketing process that eases the advisor's mind. “

Becca explains that Integrated is a process-oriented firm. “I believe humans thrive with structure and advisors are no different. Structure and consistency help strengthen relationships and create a better client experience.

We also lean into simplification. Advisors are busy, and they can only absorb so much. If you saw our execution plan, the elegance and beauty are in the simplicity.

For that September 1st deadline, we've already done the legwork well in advance. So, the second we get the green light, an announcement is sent out to all of those advisor’s clients.

Change is difficult, and advisors must deal with uncertainty when they consider going independent.

KEN BOYD

Integrated Partners: Veteran Marketers Supporting Advisors

That's when the plan goes into action. The advisor can call the client, walk them through what's happening and make sure the necessary documents are completed. The client receives clear communication, and the advisor has talking points in hand to answer the questions that inevitably come up."

A Track Record of Success

Becca has been a part of Integrated's success for years.

"I started here in 2001, two weeks out of college. So much of what I know about advisors and what it takes to build a successful practice came from Paul Saganey, our founder and CEO. And those same principles shaped how Integrated was built and how we drive growth today. People use the word 'intentional' a lot. I'd say we built Integrated with purpose."

Matt points out that company culture drives success and team retention.

"We have a culture here where we not only respect each other, but we thrive because of our differences. We're all helpers, and sometimes it's okay that we don't agree on every single thing.

People ask me all the time, like, why has Integrated grown so much? You know, I got here six years ago. We were at 12 billion. At the beginning of 2025, we were at 20 billion. We're 30 now.

The credit belongs to a structure and a plan that have existed for 30 years and amazing people who have stayed. We talked about retention of clients. We've also had an incredible job retaining advisors. It's like 99% in terms of retention, but also retention of staff."

So the biggest fear is I'm going to get trapped on a deserted island somewhere and have to do this all myself."

KEN BOYD

Integrated Partners: Veteran Marketers Supporting Advisors

The CPA/ Advisor Relationship

Another key to advisor growth is Integrated's unique CPA Alliance program.

Matt believes that: "One of the things that frightens and concerns advisors, once they go independent, is, how am I going to grow this business? Organic growth is a real struggle in this industry. I think industry averages are saying that the average advisor is growing about 2% a year. The organic growth is really slow.

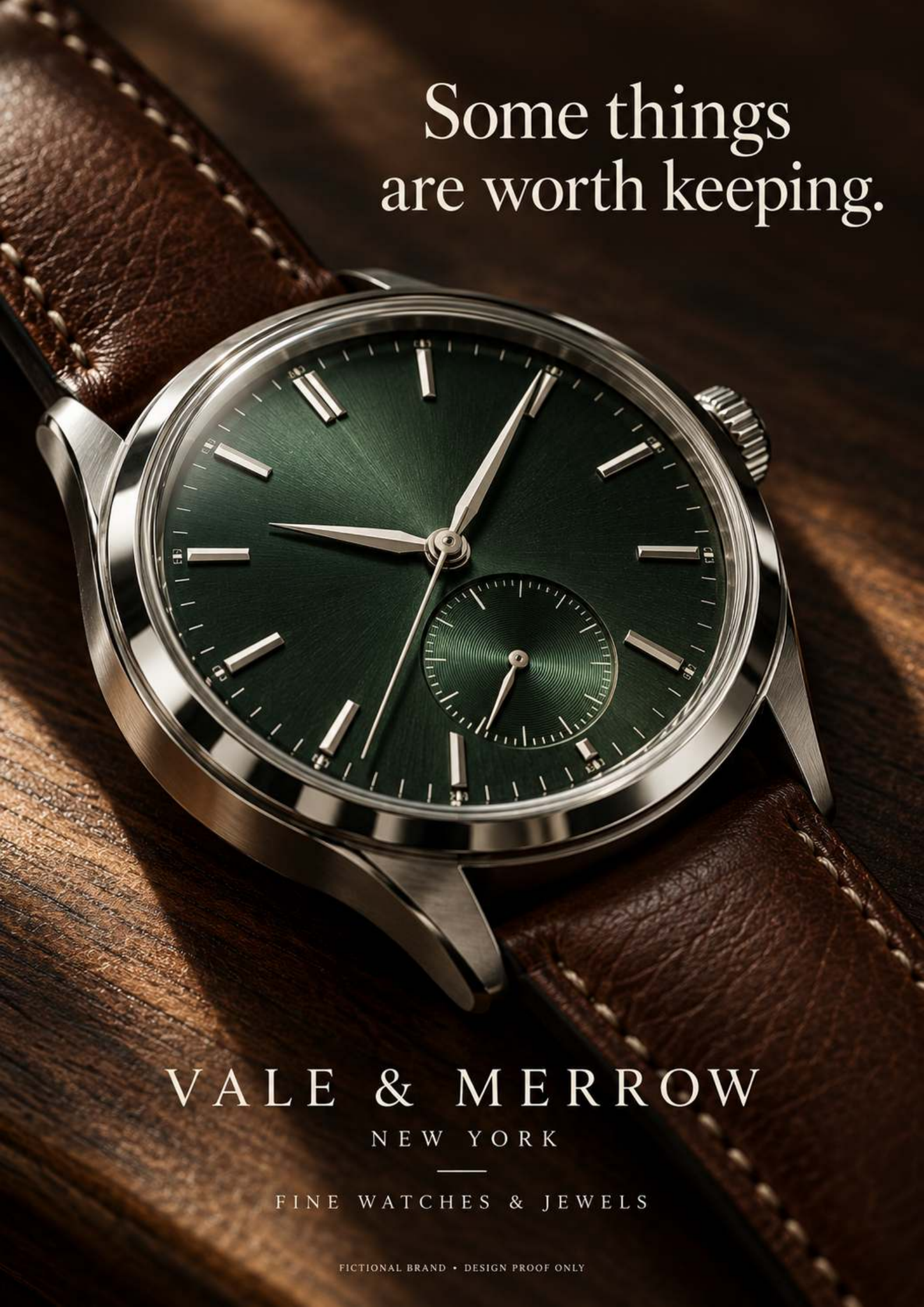
We're seeing much stronger growth than that for a few reasons. One of them is that we have an incredible CPA alliance where we align our advisors directly with CPAs. In addition to our network of 280-plus advisors, we have a network of 250-plus CPAs who work with advisors. You're able to dig into a book of business and create new clients and organic growth."

Partnering to Drive Advisor Success

Integrated Partners has a long history of partnering with advisors and supporting their growth. Each advisor gets a comprehensive plan to go independent and to create the business they envision.

As Becca said at the end of our discussion: "It's just the beauty of being independent, but on training wheels. You're not alone."

Matt believes that Integrated is an attractive place for entrepreneurial advisors that want to grow their business their way.


Some things
are worth keeping.
VALE & MERROW
NEW YORK
FINE WATCHES & JEWELS
FICTIONAL BRAND • DESIGN PROOF ONLY

Aline Wealth: Veteran Advisors Providing Specialized Advice

Peter J. Klein and Mark Kravietz on education, specialization and building a fiduciary business.

BY MAA EDITORIAL



EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION



MARK KRAVIETZ

MAA EDITORIAL

Aline Wealth: Veteran Advisors Providing Specialized Advice

Modern American Advisor interviewed Peter J. Klein and Mark Kravietz, the co-founders of Aline Wealth. They discussed their journey as advisors and how education and developing a niche have contributed to their success.

Starting in Wealth Management

Peter and Mark met while working at Lehman Brothers in New York City in the early 1990's.

As Peter explains: "Lehman Brothers in the late '80s, early '90s was the firm to be at. It was the firm that taught you how to work, and how to be a financial advisor. It was an unbelievable place to gather information, to learn to get excited and to develop your business."

Journey to Founding Aline Wealth

Peter and Mark both realized that they wanted a consultative financial advisory business, rather than Lehman's commission-based business. Peter considers this decision an "epiphany moment" in their careers.

Both advisors moved their businesses to Paine Webber, which was acquired by UBS in 2000. They spent about 20 years at the firm but eventually chose to join Hightower Advisors in order to embrace the fiduciary-centric wealth management approach.

According to Peter: "We both independently realized in 2013 that it was time to ask the question: "Why are we at this big behemoth? We just want to be a fiduciaries for our clients and their families".

And we both found Hightower Advisors separately. When I found out that Mark planted the flag on Long Island, I soon followed. And a few years later, we combined to become ALINE Wealth, and we're proud to manage about $1.5 billion of client assets today."

A Focus on Education

The co-founders have stayed committed to client education for decades.

According to Mark: "Peter and I independently built our business around a focus on education. We both felt that it was very important to educate our clients".

For example, I taught a class called Financial Strategies for Successful Retirement. Continuing education programs throughout the tri-state area would hire me to come in and teach the class."

Mark is president of the greater New York chapter of the Exit Planning Institute (EPI) and has a Certified Exit Planning CEPA) designation.

Peter earned his CFA designation. "My approach was the science of finance and trying to understand what's underneath the hood."

Developing a Specialization

Peter and Mark also developed areas of specialization based on life experiences and work with clients.

Mark describes that: "My niche is business owners. My dad came to the United States with little or no money. He got into an industry and worked from nothing to build what was a small company. He and his partner built a company and they did okay.

Later on in life, the whole industry left and went to China, and he didn't have an exit planner. He didn't have someone who could tell him you might want to monetize your business. And that was very tough on our family.

I didn't want other business owners to have the same result as my dad. I became very passionate about helping business owners get ready for and go through a business exit."

Peter's niche is the intersection of wealth management and nonprofits, or philanthropy

MAA EDITORIAL

Aline Wealth: Veteran Advisors Providing Specialized Advice

and charitable planning. Peter has also authored 3 books for Wiley – the last one "A Passion for Giving" is focused on this niche.

"About 15 years ago, a client of mine, my first major substantial client, said she needed some help. You know, I've made her a lot of money over the years. I've done very well for her. But she was alone; she had no family. She said, "I need you to find me the various nonprofits that meet my giving spectrum".

Little did I realize that she was grooming me to be her legacy agent. A couple of years later, she passed away. I got a phone call from the estate attorney who said I was to start a foundation in her honor. A true privilege, but a weighty responsibility, one the board and I take very seriously 15 years later."

Factors That Drive Success

ALINE's founders believe that a great team is key to success. Many of ALINE's team members have been with Peter and Mark for years. Consistent client education and a focus on niches are two other factors.

Another important factor is strong client relationships. As Peter points out: "If you walked into our Long Island office, right under the ALINE Wealth sign in our foyer, there's a line that says, "Clients come First, Second, and Third". We feel that relationships compound faster than money."

The Importance of Process

Mark points out that: "We're very process oriented. Every client has a certain number of engagements that we're going to have with them every year. Clients are going to get those engagements, then we're going to do things around those engagements.

ALINE's team meets weekly to build a detailed schedule, and the firm maximizes its use of technology.

Mark goes on to say: "We both maintain, along with our team members, a very rigorous calendar, and we're very careful to keep it with spaces for clients that have emergencies. For the most part, we are scheduled, and we are adopters of technology, and that's how we keep efficiency going."

Finally, the founders appreciate the support they get from Hightower Advisors.

Mark wrapped up our discussion this way: "If you're an entrepreneur, this is a phenomenal industry, and if you like helping people, helping business owners, whatever your niche is, this is a phenomenal industry to be in."

The views and opinions expressed in this article are for informational and educational purposes only and represent the author's views as of the date of publication. They do not constitute individualized investment advice, a recommendation to buy or sell any security or investment product, or an offer to provide investment advisory services. The information presented should not be relied upon as the sole basis for making investment decisions.

Investing involves risk, including the possible loss of principal. Past performance is not indicative of future results, and no investment strategy can guarantee a profit or protect against loss in declining markets.

Readers should consult their own qualified financial, tax, and legal professionals regarding their individual circumstances before making investment decisions.



Ira Ravitz: Serving Clients More Effectively as an Independent Advisor

Why leaving the wirehouse enabled a more flexible, client-first approach.

BY MAA EDITORIAL

Ira Ravitz is the Co-Founder & Managing Director of Beverly Hills Private Wealth. Modern American Advisor spoke with Ira about the challenges he faced as a wirehouse advisor, and why going independent was the right decision for his clients.

The Wirehouse Experience

Ira spent 24 years as a wirehouse advisor, first with Smith Barney, then Merrill Lynch. Over time, he became frustrated.

“I noticed a shift. Firms evolved from investment-focused to commercial banking-focused businesses. I think there is a conflict of interest at captive firms and that selling proprietary products undermines my fiduciary duty.

The pandemic was the final catalyst. We couldn’t visit clients, and we couldn’t operate as true fiduciaries. Our firm went independent to remove conflicts and serve clients without constraints.”

Investment Philosophy and Proprietary Models

Beverly Hills Private Wealth has a dedicated CIO who manages proprietary in-house equity and fixed income models. Advisors have more control over gain and loss realization decisions based on client preferences.

Ira explained that clients noticed excess gain generation from third-party managers, which prompted the shift to the in-house platform. Third-party separate account managers are still used in some cases, but embedded gains limit flexibility.

Beverly Hills also launched its first private markets fund two years ago, exclusively for clients. “Historically, we have under-allocated clients to alternative investments due to poor bank-offered opportunities. We’ve taken steps to improve our alternative investment options for clients.”

MAA EDITORIAL

Ira Ravitz: Serving Clients More Effectively as an Independent Advisor

Family Office Services: Personal CFO Role

Ira's firm emphasizes that a family office should fill a personal CFO role for clients. The core services include tax strategy, estate planning, gain and loss timing, along with philanthropic planning. Beverly Hills acts as professional trustee for select families, with discretion over entire entities.

Younger generation engagement is a known challenge, and Ira has a multi-generational focus. "The DIY investing mindset is prevalent, but volatile markets tend to shift that perspective. Many young people have not experienced a prolonged market decline. Don't confuse brains with a bull market."

Many family offices include business succession planning. "We want to be advocates for next-generation gaining outside experience before taking leadership in a family business. A straight line from the crib to the CEO's chair is generally not the most successful trend."

Ira handles relationships with clients who have multiple advisors. In those instances, he builds the client a full balance sheet even when managing only a portion of the assets. "I show clients the inefficiency and higher cost of using fragmented advisors."

Communication with a CPA can be weekly for large family office clients. "Tax complexity is a year-round concern for advisors, and close CPA coordination is a differentiator."

Ira believes that independence makes him a far more effective advisor for clients.


KATHRYN FICARRA
Contributor
kathryn.ficarra@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/kathrynficarra/

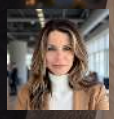
Support for the next stage

Independence continues after the launch. Access to people, expertise and opportunities can help a business develop.

BY KATHRYN FICARRA

Life & Style Editor & Head of Private Members Club

LinkedIn



Going independent is a major decision. Building the business that follows requires a different kind of commitment. Once the transition is complete, the questions become practical: where will new clients come from, how will the firm grow without overwhelming its people, and who can help the owner make better decisions?

Modern American Advisor's Private Members Club brings those conversations together. It gives advisors a way to connect with expertise, peers and opportunities as their needs develop. Independence creates choice; having the right people around you can help turn that choice into a workable plan.

Growth begins with a clear view of the clients a firm wants to serve. Through our work with Alynd, the conversation includes lead generation and client acquisition: how to build a more deliberate pipeline, assess the quality of opportunities and understand the economics of converting a conversation into a lasting relationship. The aim is informed decision-making, with results assessed against the firm's own goals.

Scale needs its own attention. More activity can expose weak processes, unclear responsibilities and an over-reliance on the founder. Ana M. Marques brings an operating perspective to the question of how a firm can grow while maintaining its service standards. Capacity, accountability and the experience of the team all belong in that discussion.

Client conversations are another part of the picture. Derrick Kinney's work encourages advisors to think about the questions they ask, the boundaries they establish and the way they communicate their value. A stronger business depends on clients understanding why the relationship matters, as well as the technical quality of the advice.

KATHRYN FICARRA

Support for the next stage

Presence and personal development matter too. With Kathryn Ficarra, that means considering how an advisor shows up, communicates and builds a recognisable professional brand. Our Women in Finance activity with Caroline Holt adds a focus on confidence, visibility and leadership. These are opportunities to develop the person leading the business alongside the business itself.

Talent connects each of these priorities. Recruitment, developing the next generation and building a team with complementary strengths can determine whether growth is sustainable. Through the club, we want to help members access relevant conversations and introductions as they consider the people their firms will need next.

The Private Members Club also creates opportunities to meet through selected experiences and events. Those encounters can help professional relationships develop beyond a formal meeting. Access, eligibility and any additional fees depend on the specific programme, partner or event; membership does not imply that every specialist service is included.

The work of independence continues long after the launch announcement. Our role is to help members find useful support as their priorities change, whether the next step is a better client pipeline, a stronger operating model, a more confident public presence or the right addition to the team.

People behind the support



Kathryn Ficarra

Presence & professional brand



Ana M. Marques

Operating model & capacity



Derrick Kinney

Client conversations & value



Caroline Holt

Confidence, visibility & leadership

NEW EDITORIAL DRAFT / proposed Kathryn Ficarra byline and service descriptions for approval.

Pens with presence



Six distinctive writing instruments for the meeting, the notebook and the signature that matters.

A good pen is one of the few objects on a meeting table that can feel entirely personal. It might be an old favorite, a gift marking the start of a firm, or something chosen because its weight and balance make writing a pleasure. The impression comes from using it naturally.

For an advisor, the right choice needs to work as well in a notebook as it does beside a contract. These six designs approach that task differently, from the substantial Montblanc 149 to the one-handed convenience of Pilot's retractable nib. Five are fountain pens; the Caran d'Ache offers a rollerball alternative.

MAA LIFE & STYLE

CONCEPT ILLUSTRATION / NOT A PICTURED MODEL

A CONSIDERED SELECTION



THE SIGNATURE PIECE

Montblanc Meisterstück 149

The black resin body, gold-coated fittings and white emblem give the 149 an unmistakable presence. Its handcrafted 18-karat gold nib is central to the appeal, but the visual scale matters too: this is a pen to try in your own hand before buying. Choose it if you enjoy a substantial object and a traditional aesthetic. On a meeting table, a plain notebook and an uncluttered pen case give it all the company it needs. A fine or medium nib is a sensible starting point for ordinary notes; ask a specialist to help match the nib to your handwriting.

Explore the model

FOR THE COMMITTED WRITER



Pelikan Souverän M800

Pelikan's beak-shaped clip gives the Souverän its own design language. The M800 combines a piston filling system with an 18-karat gold nib, making bottled ink part of the ritual. The black-and-gold version is a composed choice alongside navy tailoring. Its appeal is to someone who intends to use a fountain pen regularly and enjoys maintaining it. Ask to compare the M800 with a smaller Souverän before deciding: the proportions that look right in a photograph may feel quite different after a page of handwritten notes.

Explore the model

Manufacturer photography shown for design review. Reproduction clearance and current US availability to be confirmed.

A CONSIDERED SELECTION



TEXTURE OVER SPECTACLE

Graf von Faber-Castell Classic Ebony

The Classic Ebony pairs a fluted wooden barrel with platinum-plated metal fittings and a handmade 18-carat gold nib. The grain gives each pen a character that polished resin cannot reproduce. It is a strong choice for someone drawn to fine furniture, quiet tailoring and objects whose detail rewards a closer look. A cartridge-converter system provides a choice of filling methods. Test the grip as well as the balance: the narrow shape and textured barrel create a different experience from a large, rounded pen such as the 149.

Explore the model



READY WHEN THE CONVERSATION MOVES

Pilot Vanishing Point

Known as Capless in several markets, Pilot's retractable fountain pen lets its 18-karat gold nib disappear into the barrel with a click. For someone taking short notes throughout a meeting, dispensing with a separate cap has obvious appeal. The design makes a practical counterpoint to the ceremony of a conventional fountain pen. There is one detail to check in person: the clip sits near the writing end, so your grip matters. Try it with the notebook you actually use. The mechanism should help you stay with the conversation, with no elaborate routine required.

Explore the model

Manufacturer photography shown for design review. Reproduction clearance and current US availability to be confirmed.

A CONSIDERED SELECTION



THE DESIGN-LED CHOICE

LAMY 2000

Designed by Gerd A. Müller and introduced in 1966, the LAMY 2000 makes its impression through a continuous, restrained shape. The black model combines fiberglass with brushed stainless steel, a piston filling system and a platinum-coated 14-carat gold nib. It suits a desk where function and proportion matter more than ornament. There is little visual fuss, which is precisely its attraction. As with the other fountain pens here, the useful purchase is the nib-and-ink combination that works for you. A design classic earns its place by being used.

Explore the model



THE POLISHED ROLLERBALL ALTERNATIVE

Caran d'Ache Léman Black Matt

A fountain pen is a pleasure, but some people simply prefer a rollerball. The Black Matt Léman offers a rounded silhouette and dark finish with bright metal details, giving a familiar writing format a more considered presentation. It belongs in this selection because choosing well starts with knowing what you will actually use. Try the refill on your preferred paper and check the weight with the cap on and off. For meetings away from your desk, carrying a spare compatible refill is a small preparation that makes an expensive pen a more dependable companion.

Explore the model

Try the grip, balance and nib on your own paper before choosing. Keep a dependable backup pen for forms and unfamiliar paper.



CASA VELUNE

A slower kind of extraordinary.

FICTIONAL BRAND • DESIGN PROOF ONLY



A table for the conversation

BY CHARLES BUKOWSKI / FOOD CRITIC AT LARGE

The Mansion Restaurant in Dallas makes a considered shortlist for a client lunch with a sense of occasion.

THE MANSION RESTAURANT / DALLAS

THE MANSION RESTAURANT

The client lunch

A client lunch works best when the setting gives people something to enjoy and enough space to talk. For an advisor choosing a venue in Dallas, The Mansion Restaurant at Rosewood Mansion on Turtle Creek is an appealing place to start. Its historic residential setting brings a sense of occasion to a weekday meeting without requiring an entire evening in the diary.

The restaurant's published offer is contemporary American cooking with French influences. Lunch is served Monday through Friday, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., which makes it a practical option for a planned midday appointment. This is a recommendation based on the venue, its current published menu and its suitability for the brief; it is not a report of an anonymous dining visit.

The lunch menu leaves room for different appetites. The Mansion Tortilla Soup supplies a recognizably local point of reference, while the published selection also includes Ora King salmon, a petite filet, chicken schnitzel and the Mansion Burger. A client wanting something lighter can look at the greens or Caesar salad, with optional additions. The range matters when you are hosting someone whose preferences you may not yet know well.

For this kind of lunch, the host's preparation matters as much as the order. Reserve in advance, explain that you would appreciate a quieter table and give the restaurant an honest indication of your available time. Confirm dietary requirements before the day. If the conversation involves confidential personal or business information, ask about an appropriate private space rather than assuming a dining-room table provides privacy.

The Mansion's smart-casual dress code should be easy to accommodate after a morning of meetings. The address is 2821 Turtle Creek Boulevard, and the restaurant lists valet parking, currently at $12 per vehicle. Those are small details, but getting arrival and departure right helps a guest settle into the occasion. Build a little room into the schedule so that the bill does not become a distraction at the moment the conversation gets interesting.

Our editorial view is that The Mansion is best suited to an established client relationship, an introduction worth taking time over, or a modest celebration after an important milestone. A quick working catch-up may call for a simpler setting. A lunch here should have room for the guest's interests and a conversation that extends beyond the next item of business.

Before booking, check the current menu and prices, reconfirm lunch service and request the seating you need. Seasonal dishes change. The choice should ultimately fit the client, the occasion and your firm's hospitality policy. For that brief, The Mansion offers a persuasive combination of character, a flexible lunch menu and straightforward weekday availability.



Rosewood images / reproduction clearance pending

Dallas, Texas

Weekday lunch 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Smart casual

2821 Turtle Creek Boulevard

Reservations +1 214 443 4747

Menu and reservations

Inside Tiffany's



An afternoon at The Landmark showed what the Private Members Club can bring to the relationships that matter.

ALEX SULLIVAN / FOUNDER & CEO

THE EIGHTH-FLOOR TERRACE AT THE LANDMARK / MAA



ALEX SULLIVAN
Founder & CEO
alex.sullivan@modernamericanadvisor.com
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/alex-sullivan-3624154/

BY ALEX SULLIVAN

Founder & CEO

LinkedIn



There was a moment during our recent visit to Tiffany & Co.'s Landmark in New York when I looked around at our members and their guests and felt enormously proud of what we were creating.

Advisors were spending time with their clients. People who had only just met were finding things in common. We were being welcomed into an extraordinary setting, meeting remarkable craftspeople and enjoying an experience we would remember long after the afternoon had ended.

For me, it captured exactly where I want to take Modern American Advisor. I believe a publication should earn a meaningful place in its readers' lives. That starts with thoughtful journalism, beautiful design and ideas worth spending time with. It can also extend into the people you meet and the experiences you are able to share.

We brought a small group of members and selected clients into The Landmark on Fifth Avenue for a privately guided visit. We explored the Audrey Experience and Tiffany's connection with Breakfast at Tiffany's. We stepped inside working craft rooms and watched specialists at their benches. Seeing that skill at close quarters gave us an appreciation of the care behind the finished pieces.

There was sporting history, too. We viewed the US Open singles trophies and the Vince Lombardi Trophy, and I had the pleasure of meeting Tiffany & Co. Master Engraver Timothy Murphy. The experience continued in the eighth-floor Gallery and Terrace, where we also met former New York Giants running back Tiki Barber.

My thanks go to the Tiffany team for their welcome, and to Kathryn Ficarra for the work she puts into developing the Club and bringing people together. What pleased me most was seeing our members enjoying the experience with their guests. The setting gave everyone something to talk about. There was time to ask questions and continue conversations without rushing to the next appointment.

For an advisor, an experience like this creates another opportunity to strengthen a relationship: time together, a shared interest and a memory that belongs to both of you. Across our readership and wider network, we have people with expertise and connections that can make those opportunities possible.

That is the purpose behind our Private Members Club. We want to bring advisors, business owners and industry leaders together in ways that enrich their professional lives and give them something valuable to share with others. Practical expertise and thoughtful introductions belong alongside the member experiences.

Tiffany's offers a glimpse of the ambition. We will share future venues, dates and arrangements as they are confirmed, with the format and guest availability made clear for each experience. Our afternoon at The Landmark brought the publication, our people and our community together. I look forward to creating more opportunities for our readers to be part of it.



From left: Alex Sullivan, Tiki Barber, Dr Biraj Patel and Kathryn Ficarra at The Landmark.

Explore the Private Members Club

Adapted from Alex's published MAA story. Photography: MAA; final credits to confirm.



Leave an impression.

ADIXON

EAU DE PARFUM

FICTIONAL BRAND • DESIGN PROOF ONLY

References checked. Author wording retained.

Review copy only. These notes clarify or challenge claims; they do not silently amend the manuscript. Ken and Sarah must resolve the factual queries before publication.

S1 • Opening statistic / 2025 data

The 26.4% figure is from AdvizorPro’s 2025 channel-transition analysis, published in 2026. Its broader report describes channel transitions among switching advisors. It must not be read as 26.4% of all wirehouse advisors. Author wording retained in this proof; denominator correction requires author/editor review.

Source / dated reference

S2 • Firm count and assets / scope

The 21,669 and $146 trillion figures should not be labelled the independent wealth-advice RIA channel. SEC investment-adviser statistics encompass broader registered and exempt-reporting populations and institutional activities. The current SEC report separately identifies those categories. The “more than tripled” claim also needs a matching time series.

Source / dated reference

S3 • Role-exit framework / 1988

Ebaugh’s sequence is first doubts, seeking alternatives, the turning point, and creating the ex-role. The article is a sociological application to advisors, not research establishing that every breakaway follows these stages. Stage 2 currently describes the break, while Stage 3 describes reconstruction; author to review the mapping.

Source / dated reference

S4 • Choosing a route / 2024 survey

Schwab surveyed 200 advisors in March–April 2024, including 158 considering independence and 42 recently independent. The 44%/31% figures refer to intentions among the considering group, not completed industry moves. Among recently independent respondents, 41% took one to three years to decide.

Source / dated reference

References checked. Author wording retained.

Review copy only. These notes clarify or challenge claims; they do not silently amend the manuscript. Ken and Sarah must resolve the factual queries before publication.

S5 • Client retention / different measures

The 97% figure describes ongoing retention in Schwab’s 2024 RIA Benchmarking Study. It is not the proportion of clients following an advisor through a breakaway. The separate supported-independence survey reported 86% transition retention among its recently independent respondents. Neither establishes that relationships outweigh institutions in every case.

Source / dated reference

S6 • Investor preferences / December 2022

PwC’s cited article was published on December 2, 2022. Its 66% personalisation and 46% change/add-relationship figures describe that survey and its then-future 12–24-month horizon, not current 2026 intentions.

Source / dated reference

S7 • Remaining interpretation checks

The 2027 wirehouse market-share forecast needs its original Cerulli date and denominator. Bourdieu’s cultural capital is broader than signalling sophistication; the entrepreneurial-self attribution also needs a named source. Joining an independent RIA does not invariably mean owning a firm or losing institutional support. These are author queries, not silent rewrites.

Source / dated reference