

Debunking Myths & Common Misconceptions of ETFs

Since State Street launched the SPDR® S&P 500® ETF in 1993, exchange traded funds (ETFs) have grown to become an increasingly popular investment vehicle for both individual and institutional investors. Today there are 1,451 US domiciled ETF's funds available and \$1,979 billion in assets.¹

ETFs offer an easy, cost-efficient way for investors to incorporate various asset classes, investment styles, sectors, industries and even commodities into their portfolios. Because most ETFs are passively managed, they generally have low management fees and operating expenses. Like individual stocks, ETFs give investors the flexibility to buy and sell shares throughout the day, at the market price. It's important to keep in mind that frequent ETF trading, which typically occurs through a broker, can significantly increase brokerage commissions potentially washing away any savings from low fees or costs.

But even as ETFs have grown in popularity, there is still a great deal of misunderstanding over how they are structured and regulated, how they trade and how their performance compares to other kinds of investments. Increased disclosure, greater transparency and improved investor education are vital to helping investors decide which financial products are most appropriate for their investment needs, including ETFs. This article is designed to provide the facts behind some common ETF myths that persist today.

MYTH: ETFs ARE THE SAME AS INDIVIDUAL STOCKS.

REALITY: A stock is a type of security that signifies ownership in a corporation and represents a claim on part of the corporation's assets and earnings. A stock can be bought and sold on the major stock exchanges throughout the day at the market price. A stock's price will generally reflect the market's supply and demand for its shares.

An ETF is a commingled investment vehicle comprised of a collection or 'basket' of securities that tracks, and is intended to represent, the performance of a broad or specific segment of the market, such as US equities, small cap stocks or emerging markets. Most ETFs offer the combined benefits of index mutual funds and individual securities. Like index mutual funds, ETFs allow investors to track the returns of hundreds of domestic and international indexes. Like individual stocks, ETFs give investors the flexibility to buy and sell shares at market prices on the major stock exchanges throughout the day.

MYTH: INDIVIDUAL STOCKS, BONDS AND MUTUAL FUNDS GENERALLY OUTPERFORM ETFs.

REALITY: Any short-term or long-term analysis of the markets will demonstrate that no particular investment category or type can consistently outperform another. Performance of any security, whether it's a stock, bond, mutual fund or ETF, is determined by any number of factors, including the economy, monetary policy, market conditions or issues affecting a particular security's asset class or industrial sector. For individual stocks, fundamentals such as earnings, valuations and financial stability may also affect share prices. For bonds, factors such as interest rates, inflation and credit ratings may influence their yields.

The advantage of commingled vehicles such as mutual funds and ETFs is that they offer the potential benefits of diversification, which may help to reduce the overall risk of a portfolio, as the decline in the price of any one security may be offset by the rise in price of another.

MYTH: ETFs ARE RISKIER INVESTMENTS THAN MUTUAL FUNDS.

REALITY: There's no significant investment research that proves that all ETFs carry significantly higher risk than mutual funds. Because most ETFs are designed to replicate the performance of an associated index, their overall risk level should not be significantly higher or lower than that of the index itself. Investors should evaluate their level of comfort with the unique risk and volatility characteristics of a given index, industrial sector or asset class of interest before investing in an associated ETF.

Further, the risk and volatility level of any commingled investment vehicle, whether it is an ETF or a mutual fund, is determined by a number of factors, including:

- The performance characteristics of the fund's underlying holdings
- The inherent volatility and risk of the markets or sectors in which the vehicle invests
- The investment style the fund uses
- In the case of actively managed funds, the manager's bets on individual securities or sectors

MYTH: ALL ETFS REPLICATE THEIR UNDERLYING INDEXES.

REALITY: Most, but not all, ETFs are designed to provide investment results that generally track the performance of an underlying benchmark index (such as the S&P 500) by holding a portfolio of securities that mirror this performance. The majority of ETFs around the world use one of three techniques to achieve this goal: full replication, optimization-based tracking and synthetic replication. However, not all ETFs are replication-based; within the past few years a growing number of actively managed ETFs have been launched that leverage the expertise of portfolio managers to execute security selection and trading decisions. Let's examine each of these approaches in greater depth.

- **FULL REPLICATION.** In this approach, an ETF holds all of the securities in the same weightings as its associated index. Over time, the manager adjusts the portfolio to reflect changes in the index (such as the replacement of one security with another) and manages cash flow from dividends or income generation. This strategy tends to provide very close tracking with the underlying index.
- **OPTIMIZATION-BASED.** Designed to control trading costs and promote liquidity, this strategy uses a sampling process to create a representative or optimized portfolio of securities that closely matches the characteristics of the underlying index. While this approach may be more cost-efficient, it tends to carry a higher potential for tracking error than ETFs that use the full replication method.
- **SYNTHETIC REPLICATION.** A recent introduction to the marketplace, these funds (also known as synthetic funds) attempt to replicate index returns by purchasing derivatives such as swap agreements with one of more counterparties, such as a bank. Typically, the counterparty will agree to deliver the performance of the associated index (minus a small spread), including capital gains and dividends, in exchange for the value of the performance generated by a pool of physical securities held by the ETF (these securities are not necessarily the same as those comprising the ETF's index). This allows the ETF to mirror the performance of an index without having to own the actual securities, which can be advantageous when it is difficult or expensive to trade in certain markets or sectors. Synthetic ETFs are riskier than other kinds of ETFs because a counterparty could default on its obligations. However, financial regulators in most countries limit the amount of assets that can be invested in derivatives and require these ETFs to provide adequate liquidity to protect investors against default-related losses.
- **ACTIVELY MANAGED.** This relatively new category of ETFs allows managers to apply their own expertise in overseeing portfolio construction and trading decisions, similar to actively managed mutual funds. While the ETF will have a benchmark index, its managers will generally attempt to outperform that index's returns rather than simply match it. The main difference between actively managed ETFs and mutual funds is that actively managed ETFs are priced and traded intraday, while actively managed mutual funds can only be purchased or sold at their net asset value after the market closes. Generally, actively managed ETFs have higher expenses than replication-based ETFs.

In general, while there are benefits and risks to each approach, understanding the product structure is vital to helping investors decide which financial products are most appropriate for their investment needs.

MYTH: ETFS MAY HAVE LOWER EXPENSES, BUT THEY COST MORE TO OWN BECAUSE YOU HAVE TO PAY A BROKERAGE COMMISSION WHEN YOU TRADE THEM.

REALITY: It is true that investors pay commissions when they buy or sell shares of an ETF, as they do when they trade individual stocks. It is also true that frequent trading of ETFs could significantly increase commissions and other costs. However, the same thing can be said for trading individual stocks.

And while investors don't pay brokerage commissions when purchasing and redeeming mutual fund shares, certain share classes do carry either up-front sales loads or back-end redemption charges that compensate brokers for selling these funds. In addition, many funds charge ongoing 12b-1 fees, which are used to compensate brokers, 401(k) recordkeepers, transfer agents and other entities for marketing and servicing costs. Indeed, depending on the amount invested, the commissions an investor may pay for trading shares of a particular ETF may actually be less than the sales charges and management fees they would be charged by investing the same amount in a mutual fund with a similar strategy.

Mutual funds may incur additional costs that may not be readily apparent to investors. For example, some mutual funds can raise their investment management fees if their managers outperform their benchmarks. And mutual funds with high turnover rates may declare higher capital gains distributions, which can increase an investor's tax burden, whereas most passively managed ETFs have lower turnover rates, which generally result in lower capital gains.

It's important for investors to consider both immediate and future costs—commissions, sales charges, management fees and tax implications—when evaluating the suitability of any kind of investment.

MYTH: HIGHLY TRADED ETFS ARE BETTER THAN ETFS WITH LOWER TRADING VOLUME.

REALITY: The expansion of the ETF industry is evident in the volumes of shares traded on a daily basis. In 2014, ETF trades accounted for 44% of all equity trading volume in terms of dollars, yet most of this activity was concentrated in a small number of ETFs. The vast majority of ETFs—78%—trade less than \$10 million a day.² The range of ETFs that make up this lower tier is large and diversified, encompassing a broad range of asset classes, sectors and domestic and foreign markets.

Before you choose any kind of security, including ETFs, it's important to understand the role these securities will play in your investment strategy. Your advisor can work with you to define your objectives and help you evaluate and select appropriate investment options that reflect your investment goals, timeframe and risk tolerance.

MYTH: ETFS ARE ONLY FOR DAY TRADERS AND SHORT-TERM INVESTORS.

REALITY: ETFs are effective investment tools for all types of investors, from short-term traders to those investing for long-term financial goals such as retirement or their children's education. Their unique structure as commingled investment vehicles that can be bought and sold at market prices gives ETFs the flexibility to be used to execute a variety of investment strategies, without the added expenses of active management.

MYTH: ACTIVELY MANAGED ETFS DELIVER SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE OVER PASSIVE ETFS.

REALITY: If the last decade has proven anything about investing, it's that the only thing you can predict about the market is that it will be unpredictable. Any given asset class, investment style or active or passive vehicle may outperform any other during a given timeframe. Yet, as all mutual fund and ETF investors are told time and time again, past performance is no guarantee of future results.

In any case, performance alone should not be the sole criteria for determining whether an actively managed or passively managed fund is an appropriate choice for you. Other factors should also be considered, such as:

- **MANAGER DISCRETION.** While most passive ETFs limit investments to securities representing its associated index, an actively managed fund may have a wider degree of latitude to invest across asset classes, investment styles and sectors. This allows the fund to focus on delivering higher total returns, rather than mirroring index performance.
- **ALPHA GENERATION.** The excess return of a fund relative to the return of the benchmark index is a fund's alpha. Through effective portfolio management and trading decisions, an active fund manager may be able to outperform a benchmark in a rising market or mitigate losses in a declining market more effectively than passively managed funds. It's also possible that an active manager's decisions may result in higher volatility or greater losses.

- **COSTS.** The price of active management is higher costs. Portfolio manager compensation and higher trading costs generally result in higher expense ratios for investors.

The most important consideration when evaluating any investment option is whether it is a suitable choice, given your own investment goals, timeframe and risk tolerance. In addition, actively managed funds tend to have higher turnover rates, which can result in higher capital gains.

CONCLUSION

Over the past 20 years, ETFs have grown to become an extremely popular choice for investors seeking a cost effective option for executing both short and long term investment strategies. Understanding their unique characteristics is an important step toward determining whether ETFs can be an appropriate choice for your portfolio and the role they may play in helping you achieve your own investment objectives.

TALK TO YOUR FINANCIAL ADVISOR

If exchange traded funds interest you, speak to your advisor to determine if you could benefit from incorporating ETFs into your investment plans.

Your advisor can help you analyze your current investments, risk tolerance, tax situation and time horizon and then recommend strategies to help you achieve your goals.

ABOUT SPDR® ETFs

SPDR ETFs are a comprehensive fund family of over 100 ETFs, spanning an array of international and domestic asset classes. Offered by State Street Global Advisors, SPDR ETFs provide investors with the flexibility to select investments that are precisely aligned to their investment strategy. Recognized as the industry pioneer, State Street Global Advisors created the first ETF in 1993 (SPDR S&P 500®—Ticker SPY). Since then, we've sustained our place as an industry innovator through the introduction of many ground-breaking products, including first-to-market launches with gold, international real estate, international fixed income and sector ETFs.

For information about our ETF family, visit spdrs.com.

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¹ Bloomberg as of 12/31/2014

² Arcavision.com, Bloomberg as of 12/31/2014.

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ETFs trade like stocks, are subject to investment risk, fluctuate in market value and may trade at prices above or below the ETFs net asset value. Brokerage commissions and ETF expenses will reduce returns.

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Frequent trading of ETFs could significantly increase commissions and other costs such that they may offset any savings from low fees or costs.

Generally, among asset classes, stocks are more volatile than bonds or short-term instruments. Government bonds and corporate bonds generally have more moderate short-term price fluctuations than stocks, but provide lower potential long-term returns.

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ID3189-IBG-14165

Exp. Date: 2/29/2016

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