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Towering Success

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There's plenty for investors to worry about these days, what with a collapsing Europe, the threat of inflation, and the near certainty of rising taxes. But for many of the experts on our annual listing of the Top 100 Women Financial Advisors, it all adds up to opportunity.

Dagny Maidman of Credit Suisse, for instance, has been helping her clients thrive by assembling core portfolios of bonds, then generating additional income by selling put options on selected blue-chip stocks. Those options -- which obligate the seller to buy shares if they fall to certain levels -- command increasingly higher premiums as volatility rises. Says Maidman quite correctly: "This is very Buffettesque -- selling insurance on stocks at a time when people are at their most nervous."

Such moves helped land Maidman at No. 6 on our list. The ranking, which Barron's has been publishing since 2006, includes 25 new members this year and a number of position switches.

The ranking reflects the volume of assets overseen by the advisors and their teams, the revenues the advisors generate for their firms, and the quality of their practices. Investment performance isn't explicitly a criterion, in part because the advisors' clients have a wide range of performance goals; one yardstick doesn't work for everyone. But building and maintaining books of businesses as large as these advisors' generally requires consistently good performance.

It isn't just market savvy that got these advisors to the top; they help their clients with a wide range of financial challenges. Deeann Griebel of Wells Fargo Advisors in Mesa, Ariz., takes pride in convincing one family -- a couple with four children -- to designate who would raise their children or manage their money in the event that they were both to die before the kids are adults.

"I realized that what had been stopping them was that the person they wanted to raise their children wasn't good with money, and I pointed out that they could have a different person take on that financial role," she says. A background in psychology, she adds, is more helpful than one in finance for aspiring advisors.

Maidman would agree. Her options strategy came out of a meeting with a wealthy family that had spent most of the financial crisis on the sidelines.

They were nervous about returning to the market, until Maidman came up with the idea of selling put options on stocks they liked and understood, rather than investing in the stock market itself. They became far more comfortable with the risk. "That's when my clients trust me," Maidman says. "And when they trust me, that's when I can do the best work."

Ami Forte

Morgan Stanley Smith Barney

Palm Harbor, FL

Team Assets: $1.7 billion

Rank: 1

Ami Forte thinks of herself as "the voice of calm reason" for her clients, especially in times of turbulence and uncertainty. "My job, in part, is to keep my clients from making emotional decisions," she says. "They have complex lives, and face complex decisions about their finances and related matters." As a result of this approach, Forte says, the financial crisis has only reinforced her ties with clients. Says she: "Perhaps they didn't understand back in 2007, when I urged them to go into cash or bonds, but now they see that served them well, and it actually gives them more confidence when I suggest what they need to be doing today."

Forte and her team managed to boost their assets under management by 22% from last year -- and nail down the No 1. spot in our ranking, up from No. 2 the previous year.

But she's hardly resting on her laurels. Her clients, typically with net worths of about $30 million, include one individual with business interests in the seafood industry. She has been discussing the BP oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico with him, and sharing what she has learned with other clients.

"There is a lot going on in the world, and my clients are interested in keeping an ear open to everything; my job is to help them do that," she says.

While Forte scans the globe in search of insight into everything from oil-spill containment technologies to news on the European fiscal crisis, the investments that she is recommending remain straightforward and "free of sizzle," as she puts it. High-quality stocks that pay a reasonable dividend -- say, 2% to 3% a year -- top that list. "In this volatile environment, you have to look at total return," she says. Also on her recommended list these days are master limited partnerships, which, along with some exchange-traded funds, she uses to give her clients more exposure to commodities.

It's all about what Forte, 52 years old, calls "managing to the downside."

"Even if you give up part of the upside, protecting peoples' assets from taking a big loss can be a win," she explains. And, she adds, "if you can keep people from making a few huge mistakes, you can really help them do well with their portfolios." Case in point: Several of her clients were overexposed to Florida real estate. "There was such a boom; trying to talk people out of jumping onto that moving train wasn't an easy conversation to have," Forte recalls. Now she's working with several individuals who have suffered financially as a result of that market's collapse.

Forte has made some changes in the way she works with her clients of late. After once preferring partnerships -- working with one colleague -- to a full-team approach, she now finds herself leading a team of six. "I've been dragged kicking and screaming into this, and now that I'm there, it's wonderful, because it allows me to focus on my strengths," she says. The team includes two other financial advisors and two assistants; in July, her 27-year-old son (a veteran of Morgan Stanley's trading floor and high-net-worth strategy group) will complete his master's degree in business administration and join the team, making Forte's practice a true family affair.

Dodee Frost Crockett

Merrill Lynch

Dallas, Texas

Team Assets: $1.1 billion

Rank: 24

Dodee Frost Crockett made an unusual detour on her way to the upper echelons of financial advisory: She took time out in the early 90s to pick up a master's degree in theology. "I ended up taking the pastoral-care course -- a required one -- last of all," she says -- and that course is still helping her today. "I deal with people in one kind of crisis or another, just as a pastor would," she says. "It gave me a wonderful, fresh perspective on my job."

The training, she says, has helped her bond more closely with her clients, regardless of whether they are Christian, Muslim, Jewish or Zoroastrian. "I became a chartered advisor in philanthropy, and the theology degree gives me a way to communicate with my clients more easily about their values and what they want to be their legacy."

Here's something else about Crockett: Her husband is a descendant of a relative of Davy Crockett's. But don't expect this 30-year Merrill Lynch veteran to take a gun-slinging, last-stand approach to managing her clients' portfolios. On the contrary, Crockett, 53, describes herself as "a very conservative investor."

Her clients, she says, weathered the storm at the height of the crisis because she didn't subject their portfolios to any more risk than they needed to take to meet their goals. "Now, my clients and I actually feel closer together; it's like having been through some kind of natural disaster and survived it," she says.

The recovery is posing a fresh set of challenges. "We've tried to prepare people for an uneven recovery that will be one step back for every two steps forward," she says. That translates into an emphasis on specific sectors of the market that she believes will benefit disproportionately. "That's where an advisor still adds value," she says. "No one can afford to leave anything to chance, and clients need someone to help them identify where the opportunities created by market fears exist, and whether they are real or not," she says.

Among opportunities that Crockett is eyeing: technology stocks.

She believes that part of the ongoing recovery will involve higher levels of corporate spending, rather than consumer spending, thanks to the greater strength of corporate balance sheets.

Those companies, she believes, will be on the lookout for technology that can help them boost productivity in a still-difficult business environment. So she's working to identify companies that will benefit from that spending, and, secondarily, those that will see a productivity gain as they apply new technologies. (Crockett declined to give specific company names.)

Most of Crockett's clients are business executives who are dealing with concentrated wealth, or who have received a big payout after selling their companies, while another group is attorneys -- Crockett developed a network of relationships in the legal community after starting her career as a compliance officer. A third group is made up mostly of women who have suddenly been made wealthy as a result of a major life change: widowhood, a divorce, or even a wrongful-death-lawsuit settlement. Her eight-person team includes three advisors, a financial planner and four assistants.

Deeann Griebel

Wells Fargo Advisors

Mesa, Arizona

Team Assets: $273 million

Rank: 38

It wasn't the sight of blood that caused Deeann Griebel to give up on her early dream of becoming a doctor. It was the realization that by the time many patients went to a doctor, they had done a good job of undermining their own health, as a result of smoking, drinking or overeating.

As a a financial advisor, she figured, she could at least help keep her clients out of trouble with their finances. Still, Griebel admits, "it takes a lot of skill, persuasion and patience to get people to do what they need to do," whether it's keeping their estate plan and their will up to date, or setting aside enough for their retirement.

She even weighs in to tell older clients that they aren't spending enough, and to urge them to take their grandchildren on a trip to Hawaii -- flying first class. "What kept me out of medicine is what is keeping me in this business -- the sense that I can make a difference," says Griebel, 57, who has been performing that role for her clients since 1983.

One client in particular sticks in her mind: "I got a call from an 88-year-old client who was in the hospital and didn't have much time left; she told me the best piece of advice I'd given her was that I had forced her to spend $10,000 a year on vacations. Now she was dying, she had all kinds of wonderful memories."

Griebel's clients are much less wealthy than those of most advisors on our list, with average net worths of $2 million. She also has a larger number of clients -- some 600 individuals and clients -- at a time when many of her peers are trying to cut back.

She carefully culls her clients from a list of qualified investors; then, she says, "They are my client until the point where I can't add value." That tends to happen when a handful of her mostly middle-class clientele have spent down their portfolios in their late 70s or 80s; Griebel will still advise them on daily money-management issues, but will suggest that they take the last chunk of their assets out of longer-term investments and put it in a high-yielding bank account or certificate of deposit.

Her clients, she says, are a microcosm of middle America, people who have grown wealthy by spending a lifetime living frugally and saving while running a farm, teaching or working for a big company.

Because of that, and because of her wary view of the U.S. economy, Griebel's investment strategy for those clients comes close to redefining the word "conservative." While the stock market has recovered from its lows during the crisis, Griebel's confidence hasn't bounced back; she's keeping clients out of stocks. "There is going to be a reckoning, because I think there is far too much debt in the whole system," she says. "We aren't on planet Earth anymore. We're on Mars. Rationality has gone out the window."

As a result, a typical client portfolio might include 20% cash, 15% gold bullion, 5% foreign currencies, 5% crude oil, 20% in short-term corporate notes and 20% in short-term collateralized mortgage obligations. She has been wary since about 2004, when the ratio of debt-to-gross domestic product to hit 3-to-1. "I told my clients we are going into a depression, and that we were going to move into cash, gold and government bonds."

The result of all that is that Griebel is now being flooded with calls and referrals. "When people are scared," she says, "they are willing to take a different approach." That's why she's getting three or more calls a day from potential clients, up from only one a year or two ago.

Dagny Maidman

Credit Suisse Securities

San Francisco

Team Assets: $1.1 billion

Rank: 6

Anyone wondering just how good Dagny Maidman's market timing is might want to consider this: The day she moved her group's financial-advisory practice from Lehman Brothers to Credit Suisse in 2008 was the very day that Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy protection from its creditors.

"I didn't foresee the bankruptcy, but my clients were very concerned about their assets. Their money was going to leave the firm -- they were going to remove it -- so the only question was whether I would leave with it," Maidman says today. She opted to move to Credit Suisse because of the bank's balance-sheet strength, and because it gave her the option, as she saw it, "of being part of a small, private client group sitting atop a large institutional firm."

Maidman, 42, has always been more comfortable with that kind of institutional approach, because it lets her focus on her speciality: building portfolios and managing clients' investments. When she moved into the business of managing money after a few years practicing law, she admits she was "fairly unclear about the sales side, and I guess I didn't think through the fact that if I was going to manage money, I'd have to accumulate it first." She added: "I never pitched a trade or a stock idea; I would just ask for a meeting to discuss a potential client's issues and concerns."

Today, knowing her limitations helps her manage the day-to-day business of being a financial advisor. Maidman believes that no investment advisor, however skilled, can create the amount of wealth that people like her ultrawealthy clients can accumulate by pursuing opportunities in the business they know best. "I see my job as just protecting their wealth." She adds: "Yes, we may make a great deal of money on an idea sometimes, but because it's a small part of the allocation, it isn't going to make an immense difference to the whole portfolio's performance."

And she likes to keep those portfolios simple: no hedge funds or structured products, just basic securities that have less "tail risk," or a lower chance of something extraordinary going extraordinarily wrong.

Nowadays, she's taking a hard look at conventional portfolio theory at the request of some of her clients, and is starting to adopt a new approach to managing wealth -- fixed income, plus that strategy of selling put options on blue chips. The stocks involved, she says, "are businesses that people can look at and understand and feel OK about owning for years, if not generations."

Her five-person team works with a handful of major clients -- some 40 families or individuals, with anywhere from $10 million to more than $400 million of investible assets.

"Most of them are creative thinkers, and that is how they have made their money," she says. "Now, it's up to us to be just as creative in preserving it for them."

Sharon Sager

UBS Private Wealth Management

New York

Team Assets:

$746 million

Rank: 41

"The easy money has been made," says Sharon Sager. That means that the job for the 58-year-old financial advisor has become a lot tougher since the financial crisis, leaving her more focused than ever on getting clients' asset allocations exactly right. "We manage risk through asset allocation," Sager affirms.

In the current environment, most of her clients are likely to end up owning dividend-paying stocks in companies with strong balance sheets and a history of boosting their dividends. And Sager figures that there's a lot of room for those dividend levels to rise. Corporate cash balances are at a multicycle high, but dividend payouts are at historical lows, she points out.

Sager is in search of anything -- such as dividend-paying stocks and master limited partnerships -- that might generate some extra yield. MLPs, in particular, are intriguing.

Not only can many of these operations afford to boost their payouts, but the yields are often attractive on an aftertax basis in what she expects to be an era of rising tax rates.

Similarly, Sager is already preparing for what she believes will be an era of rising inflation, even though it might not materialize for another year or two.

"Dividend growth provides some inflation protection, and we are looking for other opportunities to obtain income," Sager explains. These include corporate bonds in "crossover" territory: bonds that either are low-rated but still investment-grade, or highly rated "junk" bonds.

Sager broke into finance after spending a decade in the fashion-and-textile business. "When I moved into textile sales, I developed a talent for working with clients, and that has really been an important part of my practice to this day," she says. That's especially true in the wake of the financial crisis, with clients still reeling from the shock. "We want to be respectful of their damaged psyches, but we don't want to pander to their fear, either." Sager says.

In light of the market sell-off at the height of the crisis, the rapid bounce off the bottom and the ongoing volatility, Sager and her team today are revisiting every client's long-term financial plan.

"A lot of them went into cash because they didn't have the risk tolerance that they had previously believed they did -- and now talking them out of cash has become challenging," Sager says.

Keeping clients financially afloat means venturing further into new areas, from new geographies -- emerging markets is "one of our highest-conviction overweight positions," Sager says -- to hedge funds and other alternative investments.

"Our emphasis in alternatives is to find products and managers that have strategies that will succeed in dampening volatility," she says.

To the clients of Sager's five-person team -- mostly individuals or families with $10 million or more of investible assets -- liquidity isn't a major worry; it's volatility that can generate immense angst, she notes.

Sager isn't only managing money for individuals. Her clients also include nonprofit institutions, some established by or introduced to her by individuals whose personal assets she already manages.

"Every client has their own set of needs and goals, and it's up to me to listen to each of them carefully -- not only to what they say, but what remains unsaid," Sager says.

If Sager keeps doing that, she and her clients could enjoy harmonious and prosperous relationships for years to come.

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