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NASHVILLE NOTES

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Process of elimination becomes the catalyst

By Jeff K. Davis

An old market saw is that bull markets take the stairs and bear markets take the elevator. The current market fits the bull market description given the slow grind higher. The S&P 500 has produced a total return of 9% YTD, 15% since the post-election low on November 14 and 43% since October 4, 2011, when equities and credit cratered following the downgrade of the U.S. and seizure in the funding markets for European banks.

The recent gains are impressive given the lack of any meaningful pullbacks other than two brief periods of less than 10% since the Q3'11 swoon. Otherwise, the S&P 500, Russell 2000 and NASDAQ Composite charts are a series of higher highs and higher lows. The recent run is curious because of the weekly announcements of weak and/or an unusually uncertain operating environment (I recognize the future, by definition, is uncertain) that retail-oriented companies are making. Markets have an uncanny ability to see 6 to 9 months out. So, recent strength may point to an improving economic backdrop by the fall.

Or maybe the Fed's elixir is lasting longer than expected when the current round of QE was announced last fall. Chairman Ben Bernanke has been very explicit that the Fed is targeting equity (and real estate) markets to support the economy via the presumed wealth effect. I would add the targeting of real estate markets has supported the recapitalization of the banking sector — a project that is now complete if one disregards a subset of troubled small banks. The strength of equities probably will not elicit any commentary in next week's Federal Open Market Committee meeting, though Bernanke may be asked about equities during the press conference that is scheduled to follow the meeting.

At Mercer Capital, we have spent 30 years studying equity market returns, expectations and how various components in a capitalization rate (or capitalization factor) alter value. Since this is a blog posting, there is no need to go into the theoretical underpinnings of discount rates and capitalization rates, but if you are interested see: "Valuing Financial Institutions" (by Chris Mercer; 1991) and Morningstar's Ibbotson SBBI Valuation Yearbook. Aside from the large- and small-cap equity risk premium, the level of long-term "risk-free" rates (here measured by the 20-year U.S. Treasury) and expected long-term earnings/cash flow growth are key. The level of Treasury yields and earnings multiples are inversely correlated, while expected (sustainable) earnings growth and multiples are positively correlated.

Two observations related to this: a general increase in rates is not necessarily bad for equity valuations if rates are rising due to stronger economic growth and therefore potentially better earnings growth. Also, if there is one attribute the Street loves when contemplating equities, it is earnings growth. And an even better attribute is accelerating earnings growth. A case in point in the banking sector is the performance of BofI Holding Inc. and Signature Bank in terms of accelerating growth and Texas Capital Bancshares Inc. in terms of decelerating growth. All three are great growth stories, but their stock charts have diverged sharply over the past several months.

The consensus around Wall Street is that equities, while perhaps not cheap, are attractive vis-à-vis alternative investments in spite of the run the past 16 months. While one can debate the extent that QE has distorted asset values and the valuation of various assets, there may be something to the consensus — at least from a mathematical perspective. As shown in the table, the S&P 500 as of March 8 was trading for 18.2x reported trailing twelve-month earnings and 13.9x consensus forward twelve-month operating earnings. To the extent the subject company (or index) in the table can sustain earnings growth that tracks nominal GDP growth (4% to 5%), maybe further multiple expansion will occur provided the Fed keeps a tight rein on long-term rates. (Note: the delta between trailing reported earnings and forward operating consensus estimate says a lot about Wall Street salesmanship and why investors rarely hear Street professionals talk about trailing earning P/Es. Cheap, a margin of safety and potential multiple expansion sells; fully valued does not.)

In addition to the Case-Shiller Index, Robert Shiller is widely known for his work on equity multiples. The Shiller P/E, which is formally known as the cyclically adjusted P/E (CAPE), is based upon a ten-year trailing average of inflation adjusted earnings. In doing so the multiple captures a full business cycle (or two) in addition to the inflation impact. As of March 8, the Shiller P/E was 23.4x. The average Shiller P/E since 1880 is 16.5x, though most of the period entailed a term structure of rates that is higher than prevails today.

I think Shiller has been arguing the market is richly valued lately, but valuation is never a catalyst. In my mind cheap is 8x to 10x normalized earnings for a value company and something higher for a growth story that is not predicated upon break-through technologies or over the horizon earnings. However, my formative years in valuing banks were the early 1990s when equities really were cheap and before Chairman Alan Greenspan unleashed the great moderation on asset values. So, I may not be able to correctly process the current environment.

Whether cheap or merely trading for a discount to a theoretical multiple (if the Shiller P/E is discarded), a catalyst is needed to close the valuation gap. The Fed may be the continuing catalyst. It has pushed rates lower and asset values higher since March 2009. The jury is out on the Fed's efforts to push economic growth higher from here, but it seems to have made most fixed investment akin to technology stocks in the late 1990s — though realization of the downside may be years away. When all but one option apparently is eliminated, the consensus may be on to something.

Multiple sensitivity

Risk-free rate, equity premiums and expected growth

Metric or calculation	Large-cap public company	Small-cap public company	Low-risk private company	High-risk private company
Yield-to-maturity 20-year US Treasury (%) [1]	2.82	2.82	2.82	2.82
+ Multiyear common stock premium (%) [2]	5.37			
x Industry beta (x)	1.00			
= Beta adjusted equity premium (%)	5.37	5.37	5.37	5.37
+ Small capitalization stock premium (%)	-	2.80	2.80	2.80
+ Specific risk associated with subject (%)	-	-	1.50	5.00
= Discount rate (%)	**8.19**	**10.99**	**12.49**	**15.99**
- Long-term sustainable growth rate (%)	-4.00	-6.00	-4.00	-6.00
= Capitalization rate (%)	4.19	4.99	8.49	9.99
= Capitalization factor (1/cap rate) (x)	**23.87**	**20.04**	**11.78**	**10.01**
S&P 500 P/E - reported trailing 12 month EPS (x) [3]	18.2			
S&P 500 P/E - forward 12 months (x) [3]	13.9			
S&P 500 P/E - Shiller CAPE (x) [4]	23.4			
Russell 2000 - forward 12 months (x) [3]	NM	16.3		

As of March 11, 2013
Specific risks and growth rate assumptions reflect hypothetical metrics for illustration purposes
1 Treasury yield for 20-year bonds per the Federal Reserve H.15 as of March 8, 2013.
2 Multiyear common stock premium per Mercer Capital's analysis of Ibbotson return data
3 S&P 500 and Russell 2000 P/E data per Birinyi Associates as reported in the WSJ on March 10, 2013.
4 Shiller P/E ratio per http://www.multpl.com/shiller-pe/
Source: Jeff K. Davis

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