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Optimise your returns in uncertain times

Current volatile world markets may be tempting you to hide your money under your mattress, but Allan Gray's Optimal Fund offers a solid alternative. Irrespective of market fluctuations over the long term, this absolute return fund focuses on reducing stockmarket risk, while still aiming to provide long-term positive returns.

Allan Gray Optimal Fund: not only for the faint-hearted
Launched more than five years ago, the Allan Gray Optimal Fund is targeted at risk-averse investors who are seeking to minimise exposure to the inherent volatility of the stockmarket. The Fund aims to capture a portion of the returns generated by Allan Gray's stock selection without exposing investors to the level of volatility they would typically experience in a pure equity fund. The Optimal Fund may also be an appropriate addition to the overall portfolio of an individual with an appetite for more risk but who requires increased diversification.

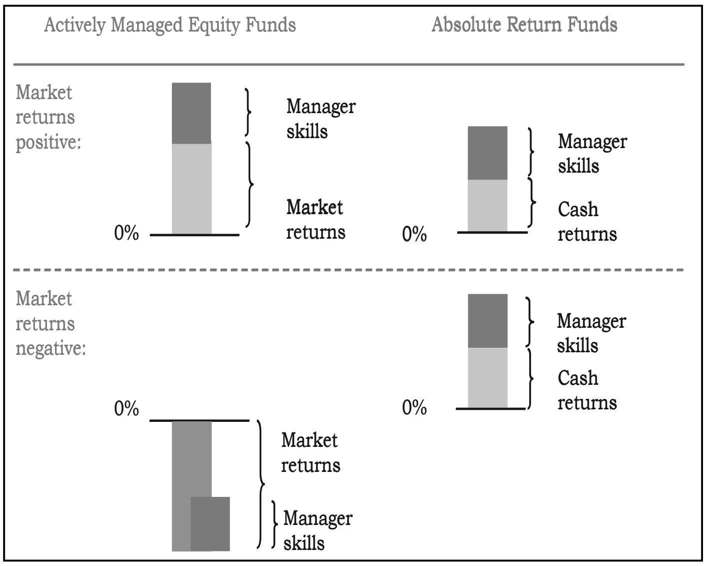
Optimal Fund outperforms its benchmark
In essence, the Optimal Fund delivers a return equal to that of interest on cash deposits plus or minus the percentage by which Allan Gray's equity portfolio out- or underperforms the market. Since its launch in 2002, the Optimal Fund has produced a cumulative return of 64%, outperforming its benchmark by 16.7%. For the 2007 calendar year it returned 9.5%, compared with the benchmark return of 8.5%.

Returns uncorrelated with overall equity markets
Following an exceptional run in equities since early 2003, we have been cautioning our clients to temper their return expectations from the market as a whole. In particular, we consider the overall level of company earnings and profitability to be very high. While we see pockets of value on a stock specific basis, we continue to believe there is substantial risk of capital loss from the overall market in the short- to medium term. As such, the Optimal Fund's very low net equity exposure and corresponding potential to deliver long-term absolute returns, uncorrelated with overall equity markets, makes it a compelling choice, in our view.

The Optimal Fund is constructed by first investing in a broad basket of shares, with specific overweight positions in those shares we believe are particularly attractive versus the market. Then, overall equity exposure in the Fund is substantially reduced using stock index futures to hedge the portfolio. By using hedging, an implied cash yield on the hedged position is earned. In addition, a further component of returns would be the difference in performance between the Fund's shares and that of the stockmarket index.

In times of strong equity markets, the Optimal Fund will naturally produce an overall absolute return far lower than the overall stockmarket or a pure equity fund. However, when equity markets are looking less promising, and the possibility of negative returns from shares is high, the Optimal Fund should continue to deliver an absolute return – thereby outperforming equities overall. This is because the Fund is designed to deliver a return that is not linked to stockmarket performance (refer to graphic above).

Stockmarket hedging



How Allan Gray uses hedging in the Optimal Fund

Hedging can be applied to physical commodities and financial instruments. One of the most common ways to hedge in financial markets is through a futures contract, also known as a derivative, because it 'derives' its value from the underlying asset – for example, a share. A 'future' is a contract between two parties to buy or sell something at a specified future date for a set price. It is a financial instrument bought and sold through the SA Futures Exchange (Safex), which is part of the JSE.

Allan Gray currently uses futures in its Optimal, Balanced and Stable funds. These funds **sell** futures on the basket of shares that make up the All-Share Index 40 (ALSI 40) to reduce share exposure, as opposed to selling actual shares. The price of a futures contract changes on a daily basis, as it is linked to the price of the underlying share or basket of shares represented by an index. The profit or loss from any change in price of a futures contract is deducted or credited to the investor's account each day.

Commentary by Delphine Govender, Portfolio Manager and Director, Allan Gray Limited