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# Meeting With a Financial Adviser? Read This First.

**The first get-together is usually free. Make the most of it.**

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Thinking of taking your muddled finances to a financial adviser for some professional assistance? Many advisers offer prospective clients an initial free meeting. You should consider meeting with two or three people to compare their approaches and your comfort level with each of them.

Here are pointers from people in the business on preparing for these meetings and then making the most of them:

## **BEFORE YOU GO**

**Decide what help you are seeking.** "Do you want financial planning or investment management?" asks Alan Moore, founder of Serenity Financial Consulting LLC in Milwaukee, Wis. The former can involve advice and recommendations on one or two questions—or comprehensive attention to your entire financial picture; the latter involves turning over one's investment portfolio to a professional. Some advisers provide both services, but others don't.

Your needs will help determine appropriate professionals to interview. Advisers' websites should give you an idea if that provider is a potential fit for your needs. "Good sites will explain what [planners] do, who their target client is, and how much their services cost," says Frank Boucher, founder of Boucher Financial Planning Services in Reston, Va.

**Understand how each adviser is paid.** You want to fully understand each person's compensation arrangements and possible conflicts of interest. Some advisers get paid only by their clients, in fees that are hourly or a flat sum or a percentage of assets under management. Others get commissions from financial-services companies for selling products, or a combination of fees and commissions.

An adviser whose compensation is strictly tied to the sale of products may be susceptible to bias. Product sellers, unlike most fee-paid advisers, may not be operating as fiduciaries who legally must put your interests first.

Lillian Meyers, president and founder of Meyers Financial in Sonoma, Calif., describes commissions as an alternative form of payment. Ms. Meyers, a hybrid fee-and-commission planner, says she may collect a commission for selling an annuity or life-insurance policy in lieu of getting paid a fee for her time.

## RESOURCES

◆ **For information about financial planning and "find an adviser" tools:**

Financial Planning Association  
[fpanet.org](http://fpanet.org)

Garrett Planning Network  
[garrettplanningnetwork.com](http://garrettplanningnetwork.com)

National Association of Personal Financial Advisors  
[napfa.org](http://napfa.org)

◆ **To see an adviser's regulatory filings, including disciplinary history:**

Securities and Exchange Commission  
[sec.gov/IARD](http://sec.gov/IARD)  
Click on "Adviser Info on IAPD"

FINRA BrokerCheck  
[finra.org/investors](http://finra.org/investors)  
Click on "BrokerCheck"

**Get organized.** Some advisers ask to see pay stubs, tax returns, investment records, pension statements, even monthly budgets at an initial meeting. Others seek to keep the first meeting as casual and painless as possible by not requiring any documents at all. Still, reviewing key documents could make you better prepared for your conversation and for subsequent meetings with the adviser you select.

Ms. Meyers insists on three years' tax forms at the first meeting. "When people don't show me their tax returns, it really shows me that they are not serious," she says. She adds that the intended use of a tax refund—say, to clear credit-card debt, or to pay property taxes—can shed light on how clients approach their finances.

AT THE MEETING

**Be realistic.** Don't expect immediate answers to your financial-planning need or concern, says Leslie Corcoran, founder of Family First Financial Planning in Stuart, Fla. "We have just met you, and we have only glanced at your information." A good planner tries to get to know a client and to read their documents in full before making a personalized recommendation, she adds. "We don't have the answer in the desk drawer ready for you in most cases."

Susan John, president of Financial Focus Inc., a firm based in Wolfeboro, N.H., and a past chair of the National Association of Personal Financial Advisors, describes a pet peeve: clients who bring to the introductory meeting a copy of an online newsletter or investment advisory that touts extraordinary returns without regard to risk, and who ask "Can you do better than that for me?" On the flip side, experts say, be wary of any adviser who promises to deliver superhigh returns; there are no guarantees in financial markets.

**Listen to your instincts.** Relax, ask questions and get a sense of the adviser's communication style, says John Belluardo, founder of Stewardship Financial Services Inc. in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y. Clients "need to feel comfortable with the person because...they'll be working through very personal financial issues."

Mr. Moore says that, as advisers, "we're asking clients to financially undress for us." The first meeting is a chance for prospective clients to decide if they are comfortable with an adviser. You are looking to have your questions answered in simple, jargon-free terms, he adds.

**Be aware that you are also being assessed.** While the planners may be interviewing to get your business, they are also trying to gauge whether you are the right fit for them. An adviser may decide that your personality or your finances aren't right for his or her practice.

From the first meeting, a good adviser is also trying to get a deeper understanding of prospective clients, including issues or concerns that aren't stated.

In the case of spouses, many planners prefer—but don't require—that both be present for the first meeting. "My preference is to see them both in the room," says Mr. Moore. "My focus is always to find out what's going on underneath the surface."

**Know that an initial meeting might turn into two.** The first meeting with a planner may not be enough to judge whether he or she is the right match, says Ms. Meyers. If that is the case, she recommends that prospective clients give the planner at least one more shot—even if it means paying for the second meeting.

"If they pay, they feel a lot freer to say, 'Now, give me something today that I can walk home with and do something about.' "