

Ask the Fool

Missing Listings

Why can't I find stock listings in my newspaper on Mondays? — C.C., Bradenton, Fla.

It's usually because the market wasn't open on the day before, Sunday. In your weekend newspaper, you'll typically find closing prices for Friday's trading, and Monday's results will be published on Tuesday. If you're in a hurry, you can look up stock prices anytime online.

But remember that many of the world's best investors don't pay close attention to the latest prices of their holdings. What matters most is how well a company is performing. You could do quite well in your investing life without checking your portfolio's status every day or every week.

Where can I find out what Wall Street's expectations are for various companies' upcoming quarterly reports? — K.W., Mansfield, Ohio

Many brokerages these days offer Wall Street research reports. But consider not paying too much attention to expected earnings. Many times, an analyst's expectations for the firm's upcoming performance is based on comments and guidance from the firm itself. If a company is telling analysts what it expects to earn and then it earns it, or exceeds the estimate, how impressive is that, really?

Analysts' reports can be informative when they deliver insights into the challenges facing an industry and its component companies and insights into the health and competitive position of various firms. Just be wary of estimates of future numbers, as the future is hard to predict accurately. And take ratings such as "strong buy" and "outperform" with a grain of salt, too. Analysts don't give out many negative ratings, as they'd rather not tick off companies that might give their employers business.

Got a question for the Fool? Send it in — see Write to Us



The Motley Fool®

To Educate, Amuse & Enrich

Fool's School

The Cost of Waiting

The earlier you start to save and invest, the better off you'll likely be — by far.

For example, suppose you begin saving at age 45, and invest \$5,000 per year for 20 years, earning the market's historical average return of 10 percent per year, with 3 percent annual inflation. You'll end up with \$286,375 before inflation, and \$204,977 after inflation. If you don't begin saving and investing until age 55, you'll have to sock away \$18,000 a year — or delay your retirement until age 75 — just to end up with the same amount of money! (And by the way, retiring with just \$200,000 won't be enough for many people.)

In contrast, if you begin at age 25, in 40 years you'll end up with nearly \$1 million after inflation. Delay your retirement until age 67, as many 25-year-olds today will likely end up doing, and you'll end up with more than

\$150,000 extra. Meanwhile, an investor who starts at age 45 will have only 22 years until she turns 67 and will have to sock away more than \$37,000 per year to amass the same ultimate sum. Not many people could do that.

Are you about to bash your 50-year-old head against a wall? Please don't — all is not lost:

- You may be able to save more than \$5,000 per year. One rule of thumb is to save and invest 10 percent of your income, but the higher your percentage, the better.

- Even if you start investing at age 50, you have a good amount of time in which to accumulate wealth. If you can invest \$10,000 per year for 20 years, earning 10 percent, you'll end up with more than \$400,000 after inflation. Not too shabby, eh?

- On the other hand, remember that a 10 percent return isn't guaranteed — you might average less, or more.

Our Foolish calculators at www.fool.com/calcs/calculators.htm can help you determine how much you'll need to accumulate to retire securely.

My Dumbest Investment

A Big Tax Loss

In the mid-1970s, my broker bought me some shares of a Mexican company, a few at a time, whenever I had some extra dollars left over in my account. It cost about 10 cents per share at the time. I sold them because of my irritation at having to file a one-page tax form each year — and netted \$315. A few decades later, I looked the stock up, and it was around \$55 a share! Avoiding that extra tax form cost me a bundle.

— L.S., via e-mail

The Fool Responds: It's good to be tax-smart about our investments, especially at this time of year. If you have some big gains, you might sell some stocks with losses, to offset them. But think twice before buying or selling a stock just because of taxes. Sometimes you're better off taking a tax hit and moving on to a more promising investment. With this Mexican company, you should have assessed its potential and sold if you didn't believe in it. If it looked like a long-term winner, hanging on would have been best. Get more tax guidance at

www.Fool.com/taxes. Do you have an embarrassing lesson learned the hard way?

Boil it down to 100 words (or less) and send it to The Motley Fool c/o My Dumbest Investment. Got one that worked? Submit to My Smartest Investment. If we print yours, you'll win a Fool's cap!

LAST WEEK'S TRIVIA ANSWER

Born in Charlotte, N.C., in 1959, today I operate more than 6,600 stores in 44 states. I'm a Fortune 500 company, and serve mainly low- to middle-income customers, offering them everything from cat litter to hair clips and soda. My name is a variation of Kinfolk Bill or Clan Pelf. I rake in more than \$7 billion annually, and I've been paying a dividend since 1976 and increasing it each year. 2008 was a miserable year for the stock market, but my stock was the best performer in the S&P 500 that year, rising a whopping 38 percent. Who am I? (Answer: Family Dollar)



Write to Us! Send questions for Ask the Fool, Dumbest (or Smartest) Investments (up to 100 words), and your Trivia entries to Fool@fool.com or via regular mail c/o this newspaper, attn: The Motley Fool. Sorry, we can't provide individual financial advice.

What Is This Thing Called The Motley Fool?

Remember Shakespeare? Remember "As You Like It"?

In Elizabethan days, Fools were the only people who could get away with telling the truth to the King or Queen.

The Motley Fool tells the truth about investing, and hopes you'll laugh all the way to the bank.

The Motley Fool Take

UnitedHealth Group

Health insurance giant UnitedHealth Group (NYSE: UNH) beat analysts' quarterly earnings estimates by a whopping 11 percent, only to see its stock slump.

Then again, management couldn't have expected much more. Wall Street is a "what will you do for me tomorrow?" kind of place, and the company is still dealing with a high unemployment rate, which is a double whammy. It lowers enrollment in its profitable commercial business, and it increases the number of people on COBRA, who tend to be high users of medical services. UnitedHealth is also expecting lower payments from government plans to put pressure on the bottom line.

This earnings season, health insurers are likely to trade more on the whims of politicians than on financial fundamentals, now that the future of health-care reform seems less certain. Of course, reforms might actually deliver an expanded base of customers who are required to purchase health insurance.

Generating billions in cash flow each year, UnitedHealth isn't as cheap as it's been in the past right now, but it's not really expensive, either. Investors who can ride through the tough year can hope to see the insurer improve once the jobs come back.

(UnitedHealth Group is a Motley Fool Inside Value and Motley Fool Stock Advisor selection, and the Fool owns some shares of it, too.)



Name That Company

Based in Louisville, Ky., and about half a century old, I'm the nation's fourth-largest health insurer and the second-largest Medicare benefits provider. My business units include group health insurance, individual health insurance, Medicare, TRICARE and specialty benefits. I have more than 10 million medical members and millions of other members, and my network includes more than 600,000 doctors, hospitals, pharmacies and other providers in every state. I'm a member of the Fortune 500, employ 28,000 people and offer "Guidance when you need it most." My ticker symbol is what you can do with a tune. Who am I?

Know the answer? Send it to us with Foolish Trivia on the top and you'll be entered into a drawing for a nifty prize!