

Getting started on saving

Building wealth is like building a brick wall. You place one brick on top of another and make sure the wall is solid before you put on the next brick. Saving to build wealth is similar—you have to set realistic goals and work to accomplish each step before moving on to the next brick, then the next row.

You may think it is hard to save. But if you set aside even small amounts on a regular basis, in just a short time you can build a cushion to help you weather short-term emergencies, such as car repairs or the need for a new household appliance.

Take your time

You can't build wealth overnight. A good first goal is a savings account for emergencies. An emergency savings account is money you set aside to cover expenses in case you lose your job or suffer an injury that keeps you out of work.

Emergency funds should equal three-to-six months of take home pay for the family's primary breadwinner. Emergency savings can also be used for unexpected and expensive household expenses, such as car repairs or a furnace replacement.

Interest

Interest is the cost of using money.

Your bank pays you interest when you leave your money on deposit. If you borrow money, you pay interest to the lender. Saving institutions often use the letters APY (annual percentage yield) after an interest rate. This is the amount your money would earn if left on deposit for one year. There are two kinds of interest, simple and compound. Simple interest pays interest only on your deposits. Compound interest is better, because it allows you to earn interest not only on your deposits, but also on the interest you earn as time goes on.

Small changes, big savings

Tracking day-to-day spending can help you to avoid wasting money and to develop a budget. A budget is a spending plan that helps you forecast and control your expenses. Knowing what you spend now is the first step in creating a budget.

Many people find that a few small changes can add up to big savings. To create a budget you need to know how much you spend each month—and then compare that figure to your take home pay. Once you have established a budget and lived with it for a few weeks, you'll see what to cut back on. If you spend less than you earn, you'll have some money to save.

Scoring a goal

Financial goals are personal markers that you set for yourself throughout life. They often fall into short-term and long-term categories. Knowing your goals can help you save for them. Short-term goals are ones you would like to achieve in one or two years, such as finishing your education or buying a car. Long-term goals may take more time to reach—it might take five years or more to be in the position to buy a home, and much longer to save enough for a secure retirement or pay for your children's college education.

Stashing the cash

It's better to keep your emergency money in an account where you can withdraw it quickly and easily when you need it. (If you are on public assistance, there may be limits to how much you are allowed to have in your savings. Before you start a savings program, check with your benefits counselor.)

Money that is easily available is said to be "liquid." You can keep funds that you might need at short notice in a savings account or credit union share account, a money market deposit account or even a short-term certificate of deposit (CD).

In a government-insured savings account, your money won't earn much interest, but it will be safe and easy to access. Short-term certificates of deposit (CDs) might pay a little more than your savings account does. You can find terms as short as one month on CDs. On the Internet, Bankrate.com can help you compare interest rates at different institutions.

Savings accounts

Savings accounts are designed to keep your money safe and help it grow. Accounts at banks are insured by the federal government for up to \$100,000. The bank pays you interest on the money you have in your account. You can make deposits into your account and withdraw money when you need it.

Like banks, credit unions offer savings accounts (called share accounts) and other financial services. Credit unions are non-profit savings and lending organizations that provide services to members who have a common bond, such as working for the same company, living in the same community or belonging to the same church. Deposits in federal and state chartered credit unions are insured for up to \$100,000 through the National Credit Union Administration (NCUA).

Individual development accounts (IDAs) are special sponsored savings accounts that help low-income families save money for qualified post-secondary education or job training, to buy a home or to start their own business. Contributions are augmented or matched by private and public institutions. Most participants in IDAs also take part in mandatory money management classes to help them repair their credit, create a budget and stick to their savings plan. The Corporation for Enterprise Development (www.cfed.org) has an online directory of individual development account (IDA) programs nationwide.

Setting up an account

To open a savings account, most banks require two pieces of ID, one with a picture on it. You will usually need a Social Security number to open a bank account. The amount required for an initial deposit varies. Some banks require only \$1—others ask for \$50, \$100 or \$500. You may use cash or a check to open an account.

When you open a bank account your banking history may be verified with an account screening company, such as ChexSystems. If you've ever had a problem with a bank account, such as closing your account without enough money to cover all outstanding checks, you may be denied an account. If you believe the information is incorrect, ask the bank officer how to contact the account screening company. If the company has incorrect information on file about you, you have a right to prove it's wrong.

Getting the most from your savings

If you save regularly, the day will come when you can buy wealth-creating assets that increase in value or earn money. Such assets include savings accounts, retirement plans, stocks and bonds and your home or other real estate. In the U.S., the greatest source of wealth for most households is the value of their homes.

Most experts advise that you try to save 10% of your earnings each year. If this is hard to do, start with a smaller percentage. To force yourself to save, schedule automatic pay-day deposits that go to a savings account or individual retirement account (IRA).

Certificate of deposits (CDs), also called time deposit accounts, are a safe way to make your money grow. Most CDs are issued by banks, but you can also buy them through brokerages. CDs sold by banks and some brokerage companies are insured by the FDIC up to \$100,000 per depositor.

CD rates vary widely, although they are usually higher than rates paid on savings accounts. You leave your money in the CD for a specified period and in return you earn favorable interest rates. In general, the longer you leave your money on deposit, the higher the interest rate you'll earn. The times vary from one month to 5 years. If you cash out a CD before the maturity period ends, you'll pay a penalty.

Investing in the U.S. government

Treasury securities are safe and secure investments because they are guaranteed by the U.S. government. Savings bonds can be purchased in denominations ranging from \$50 to \$10,000. You buy the bonds at a discount from their value at maturity. Interest varies, but you always get a minimum return. Savings bonds are payable only to the person to whom they are registered.

You can buy Series EE (guaranteed to reach face value in 20 years) or Series I (inflation adjusted) bonds. EE bonds are issued at 50% of their face value. (A \$100 EE Bond costs \$50.) Series I bonds are issued at face value (a \$100 I Bond costs \$100) and pay a fixed rate of interest that is adjusted for inflation. For more information visit the Savings Bonds web site (www.savingsbonds.gov).

Tax breaks for retirement

Individual retirement accounts (IRAs) are savings accounts designed to help people put away up to \$3,000 per year for

their retirement. (People over 50 can deposit \$3,500 per year.) Federal regulations require that IRAs be managed by a custodian, such as a bank, credit union, insurance company, mutual fund or brokerage firm.

There are two kinds of IRAs, traditional and Roth IRAs.

Traditional IRAs give account holders a break on income taxes because you can fund the account with pre-tax income and deduct contributions in the current tax year. You don't owe income taxes on your contributions or investment earnings until withdrawal, usually after you are 59 and a half. If you withdraw money from your IRA before that time, you must pay a 10% penalty on top of any income tax that is due.

Roth IRAs are not tax-deferred (you invest after-tax income) but earnings are tax-free.

If you contribute to a traditional IRA and a Roth, your combined contributions in 2004 can't exceed \$3,000. (The combined limit for people over 50 is \$3,500 per year.)

If you are over age 59 and a half, or disabled, Roth IRA withdrawals are not subject to federal income tax as long as the account is at least five years old. You may make withdrawals at a younger age if you are using the money for qualified first-time homebuyer expenses of up to \$10,000. (For more information on IRAs, visit the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) web site (www.irs.gov).

Saving at work

Don't miss a chance to save at work. Some employees avoid participating in company retirement plans because contributions reduce their take-home pay. But you can maximize your retirement savings by taking advantage your employer's matching funds. Employer-sponsored plans usually match your contributions up to a certain limit, so if you invest some of your own pre-tax money, you'll be eligible for your employer's contributions. At tax time, you will owe less money because the portion of your salary that you contributed to your employer's retirement plan is not taxable.

Risks and rewards

Everyone would like to earn the highest possible return on their money. **But as the return goes higher, so does the risk that you might lose your money.**

Savings accounts and bank CDs that are insured by the FDIC offer a smaller return than other types of investments because they are safer. In contrast, stocks, bonds and mutual funds are not insured and historically have earned more in the long run.

When you are considering an investment, it's important to ask about potential returns, risk and liquidity (or how easy it is to get your money when you need it). It is unlikely that you will find a single investment which gives you the best of all three: high return, low risk and ease of access.

It can be risky for individuals to buy stocks. Do not blindly follow anyone's advice about stocks without checking out the information for yourself. There is no guarantee that stock prices will go up or that you will make money on stocks.

Many individuals invest in mutual funds to "diversify," or spread out the risk of investing in stocks. Mutual funds are portfolios of stocks, bonds and other securities in which the public can buy shares. Each investor shares in the fund's gains, losses and expenses.

For further information

America Saves (www.americasaves.org) offers free membership and financial planning advice to those who pledge to save at least \$10 per month towards a goal.

American Savings Education Council (www.asec.org) offers advice on saving for college, home purchases and retirement.

Bankrate (www.bankrate.com) provides current rates for CDs and money market accounts.

The Corporation for Enterprise Development (www.cfed.org) has an online directory of individual development account (IDA) programs nationwide.

The Credit Union National Association (www.creditunion.coop) can help you locate a credit union to join.

Savings Bonds (www.savingsbonds.gov) is a federal government site that provides information on savings bonds and Treasury bills.

Consumer Action

www.consumer-action.org

717 Market St., Suite 310

San Francisco, CA 94103

415-777-9635

TTY: 415-777-9456

hotline@consumer-action.org

523 West Sixth St., Suite 1105

Los Angeles, CA 90014

213-624-8327

Chinese, English and Spanish spoken.

MAKE YOUR
MONEY WORK
FOR YOU

SAVING TO
BUILD WEALTH

CapitalOne
what's in your wallet?SM

This brochure was created by Consumer Action in partnership with Capital One Services, Inc. © 2004 Consumer Action

MONEY WISE

A CONSUMER ACTION PUBLICATION

