



Complete Transparency and a 'Heart for Service': How Fee-Only Financial Professionals Put Clients First

Forty years ago, a group of financial professionals had a revolutionary idea: No commissions, referral fees or sales incentives. Just transparent advice that improves lives, paid for directly by the client. Their principles still hold true today.

By David Bromelkamp, Published September 22, 2026

When consumers search for a financial advisor, they're often confronted with a confusing array of titles, credentials, compensation methods and marketing messages. Financial advisors may describe themselves as fiduciaries, wealth managers, financial planners, investment advisers or retirement specialists. It can be difficult to understand what truly distinguishes one advisor from another. More than four decades ago, John Sestina helped address that problem.

Sestina was one of the pioneers of the fee-only financial planning movement and one of the founders of the National Association of Personal Financial Advisors (NAPFA). Recently, I had the opportunity to speak with him about the origins of fee-only financial planning and the principles that motivated the early leaders of the profession. What struck me most about our conversation was how strongly his focus remained on consumers.

A simple idea with powerful implications

According to Sestina, the fee-only movement emerged from a simple concern: Consumers often didn't understand how they were paying for financial advice.

"There was no other organization that cared about the fees," he explained.

Many consumers paid commissions, sales charges or other costs without fully understanding how those charges affected their financial decisions. The early fee-only planners wanted to provide a simpler and more transparent relationship between advisor and client, Sestina said, where "the client paid the fee and knew what he was paying."

In his view, transparency creates trust. When clients clearly understand how their advisor is compensated, they can focus their attention where it belongs: On the quality of the advice itself. "It was a direct relationship between the client and the fee," he explained. That principle remains just as relevant today as it was in the early 1980s.

Helping you understand what you're buying

Back then, many consumers struggled to evaluate financial advice because, Sestina said, they "had no idea what they were buying." To him, financial planning should never be mysterious. Consumers deserve to know what services they're receiving, how their advisor is compensated and what value they should expect in return.

The fee-only model was designed to provide clarity. Rather than navigating a maze of commissions, incentives and product-related compensation arrangements, consumers could evaluate advice based on its quality and relevance to their financial goals. Sestina believes that simplicity benefits everyone.

Why comprehensive planning matters

Although fee-only financial compensation often receives the most attention, Sestina emphasized another word that was equally important to the profession's early leaders: Comprehensive.

When I asked him how he defined comprehensive financial planning, his answer was immediate: "Comprehensive meant comprehensive. That's everything. Total. Inclusive." For Sestina, financial planning was never intended to focus solely on investments. A truly comprehensive financial planner examines all aspects of a client's financial life, including retirement planning, insurance, taxes, estate planning, risk management and long-term financial goals.

Consumers benefit when their financial advisor understands the full picture rather than addressing isolated pieces of a financial puzzle. A recommendation that appears sensible in one area may have unintended consequences in another. Comprehensive financial planning seeks to coordinate these decisions so that all parts of a family's financial life work together. That broader perspective remains one of the defining characteristics of professional financial planning.

Protecting consumers through knowledge

Throughout our discussion, Sestina repeatedly returned to the importance of consumer education. He remembers a time when consumers had very little guidance for distinguishing between different types of financial advisors. "There was no standard," he recalled. As a result, consumers often selected financial advisors without fully understanding differences in compensation, services or professional training.

One of the goals of the early fee-only movement was to help consumers make more informed choices. Sestina hopes the leaders of the movement will be remembered for protecting consumers by giving them knowledge. Knowledge empowers consumers. It allows them to ask better questions, understand potential conflicts of interest and make more informed decisions about who they should trust with their financial future.

The value of professional competence

Sestina also spoke passionately about the importance of continuous learning.

The early pioneers of financial planning came from diverse professional backgrounds and spent countless hours sharing ideas, analyzing opportunities and learning from one another. "We were all education," he recalled. Their discussions extended far beyond investment. They explored real estate, taxation, insurance, business ownership, retirement planning and many other areas that affect a family's financial well-being.

Consumers benefit when financial planners continually expand their knowledge and develop expertise across multiple disciplines. Financial decisions rarely exist in isolation, and advisors who understand the interconnections can often provide more valuable guidance. For Sestina,

professional competence was not simply about passing examinations or earning credentials. It was about developing the judgment necessary to help families make better decisions.

A profession built on service

Perhaps the most enduring lesson from my conversation with John Sestina was his belief that financial planning is fundamentally a service profession.

When I asked what future leaders should remember, he spoke about commitment, generosity and helping others. "You have to have a heart for service," he said.

The pioneers of comprehensive, fee-only financial planning believed their responsibility extended beyond managing money. Their goal was to help people make better financial decisions, avoid costly mistakes and achieve greater confidence about their future. That service mindset remains one of the comprehensive, fee-only financial planning profession's greatest strengths. The best financial advisors do more than recommend investments. They educate, coach, encourage and guide families through some of the most important decisions of their lives.

The lasting lesson for consumers

Forty years after the birth of the comprehensive, fee-only financial planning profession, John Sestina's message remains remarkably relevant.

Consumers deserve financial advice that is transparent.

Consumers benefit from advisors who look at their entire financial picture.

Consumers should understand how their advisors are compensated.

Consumers should seek professionals who are committed to continuous learning and lifelong service.

Most importantly, consumers should remember that the purpose of financial planning is not simply to manage money. It is to improve lives.

As Sestina reflected on the profession he helped build, his focus remained exactly where it was at the beginning: Helping consumers make better decisions through better advice.

That may be the most important legacy of the founders of the comprehensive, fee-only financial planning profession — and one that continues to benefit consumers today.

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David Bromelkamp is an investor advocate, author and founder of AdvisorSmart®, established in 2018 to help individual investors make smarter decisions about finding, evaluating and compensating financial advisors. Sometimes referred to as the "Jerry Maguire of Financial Advice," he is passionate about helping consumers obtain objective, comprehensive, fee-only advice. He is the author of *AdvisorSmart for the Individual Investor: Your Guide to Selecting a Financial Advisor to Get Better Financial Advice* (2025) and is writing his second book, *FeeSmart for the Individual Investor: How to Get Objective Financial Advice at a Fair Price*. He is also the author of the Mister Fiduciary blog, which explores what it means for financial professionals to uphold high fiduciary standards.

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