



If You're Looking for Financial Advice, Start with This Question (It Isn't About Fees)

Before you begin searching for a financial professional, ask yourself what kind of financial advice you need. Only then will you know where to look - and what you can expect when it comes to fees.

BY DAVID BROMELKAMP, PUBLISHED MAY 11, 2026

Most investors begin their search for a financial advisor by asking a familiar question: "What do you charge?"

It's understandable - but it's the wrong place to start. The better question is simpler and more revealing: "What type of financial advisory service do I need?"

Until you answer that, conversations about fees, compensation models and even which advisors to consider are premature.

Start with the service you need and want - not the fee

Financial advice generally falls into three distinct service models. Understanding which one fits your situation will clarify everything that follows.

1. Comprehensive financial planning (advice only): Some investors are comfortable managing their own investments. They understand diversification, use low-cost funds and prefer to keep control of their portfolios. What they need is not portfolio management, it's guidance. That may include:

- Retirement planning
- Tax strategies
- Social Security decisions
- Estate planning coordination
- Insurance analysis
- Cash flow and life planning

For these investors, an advice-only financial planner - someone who does not manage investments at all - can be an excellent fit.

2. Investment management: Other investors want or need to delegate their portfolios. This group often includes:

- Younger investors who haven't yet developed investment expertise
- Professionals who lack time or interest
- Retirees seeking simplicity and oversight

In these cases, investment management - often paired with financial planning - provides structure, discipline and ongoing oversight.

3. Integrated financial planning and investment management: For many successful investors, the most practical solution is a combination of both. As wealth grows, so does complexity:

- Tax-efficient portfolio management becomes critical
- Withdrawal strategies matter
- Coordination across taxable and retirement accounts becomes more nuanced

Here, integrating financial planning with investment management can be especially valuable - particularly when tax efficiency is central to long-term outcomes.

Why this distinction matters

Once you define the service you need and want, the compensation conversation becomes much clearer.

- **Advice-only financial planning firms** typically charge hourly, flat or ongoing retainer fees
- **Investment management firms** most often charge a percentage of assets (AUM)
- **Wealth management firms** providing both financial planning services and investment management services most often charge a percentage of assets (AUM)

Starting with fees, without understanding the specific services, often leads to mismatches between what investors expect and what advisors actually provide.

The growth of advice-only financial planning

A growing number of investors are opting for the model that separates financial planning advice from asset management entirely: Advice-only financial planning. These firms:

- Do not manage investments
- Do not charge AUM fees
- Focus exclusively on delivering financial planning advice

As Steven Fox, founder of AdviceOnly, explains: "Investors deserve the option to pay for advice the same way they pay for other professional services - clearly, transparently and without being tied to their investment balances."

This model is particularly appealing for investors who want objective financial planning advice while maintaining control of their assets.

Where to find advice-only financial planners

Traditional directories, such as the National Association of Personal Financial Advisors, Wealthramp and FeeOnlyNetwork, are excellent starting points for finding fee-only financial advisors. But "fee-only" does not necessarily mean "advice-only." Many advisors in these networks still manage investments.

Organizations such as the Alliance of Comprehensive Planners and the Garrett Planning Network also emphasize comprehensive financial planning and often support retainer or hourly models. However, many of their members still provide investment management services - sometimes for an assets under management (AUM) fee and sometimes bundled into a flat retainer fee.

For investors who want financial planners who exclusively provide financial planning advice and never manage investments, some more targeted resources are emerging:

- AdviceOnly. A network of advice-only planners
- Advice Only Network. A list of planners committed to advice-only models
- Advice-Only Financial. A directory of advice-only professionals (fees apply)

- Advice-Only Planners list. A Transparency Movement community-driven list from financial advisor Sara Grillo

These are among the few resources designed specifically for investors who want financial planning without investment management.

As Grillo notes: "Transparency isn't just about disclosure - it's about making sure clients actually understand how their advisor gets paid and what they're paying for."

How to screen for the right fit

Once you identify potential financial advisors, a few well-placed questions can quickly clarify alignment:

- **Do you manage investments or charge an AUM fee?** If you want advice only, the answer should be no.
- **How are you compensated?** Look for clear hourly, flat or retainer pricing.
- **Do I need to move my accounts to work with you?** Typically, not for advice-only planners.
- **What types of clients do you typically work with, and what issues do you specialize in?** This is often one of the most important indicators of fit.
- **What does your financial planning process include?** Look for comprehensive, integrated advice.

The bottom line

The financial advice profession offers more choice than ever, but clarity comes from asking the right first question. Before comparing fees or interviewing advisors, step back and ask: "Do I want financial planning advice, investment management - or both?"

That single decision will guide everything else:

- Where you look
- Who you hire
- And how you pay

Because the goal isn't just to find a financial advisor. It's to find the right kind of advice for your life.

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David Bromelkamp is an investor advocate and the founder of AdvisorSmart®, established in 2018 to provide investors with the education they need to access better financial advice. Sometimes referred to as the "Jerry Maguire of Financial Advice," he is passionate about objective financial advice and is leading the charge to educate investors about the best approach to finding objective, fee-only fiduciary financial advisors. His first book, *AdvisorSmart for the Individual Investor: Your Guide to Selecting a Financial Advisor to Get Better Financial Advice* (2025), arms consumers with the knowledge they need to succeed. He is also the author of the Mister Fiduciary blog, which explores what it means for advisors to deliver *great financial advice* by upholding the *highest fiduciary standards*.

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