

Keeping Cool

A family lesson helped advisor Jeff Fishman support his clients during recent Hollywood strikes.

Morningstar Q1 2024 Magazine | by Charles Keenan

Even though the recent labor strikes for actors and writers have ended, Jeff Fishman counsels caution to his Hollywood clients as film and television production returns to normal. Fishman, founder of JSF Financial, based in Los Angeles, relies on an old family mantra to guide his clients through these volatile times in the markets.

“My grandfather’s lesson was always to keep an even keel,” he says. “You can’t let your lows get you too low, and you can’t let your highs get you too high.”

Those words of wisdom resonated with many of Fishman’s clients last year, when many writers and actors weren’t earning any income from employment. The walkouts by two major unions were historically long and crippled Hollywood by occurring at the same time. Yet settlements by the Writers Guild of America and the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists mean that many are returning to work in 2024.

Some of the major studios are talking about cost-cutting, though, so nothing’s a given. Which means that for Fishman and these clients, much work needs to be done. It’s time again to save, pay down debt, and maybe forgo a big vacation.

“This is going to be a recovery year,” Fishman says. “Clients need to replenish savings from what they had to take out last year, if they had no other ancillary sources of income.”

Not all of Fishman’s clients are actors and writers. He also works with heads of studios, production company owners, and entertainment lawyers, with the industry making up about half his business. His roster also includes professionals such as doctors, accountants, and sports stars.

Getting Prepared

While these clients might not face the same volatility of contract work, the strikes are a reminder that anyone can be vulnerable to financial setbacks. Fishman and the

entertainment industry anticipated the labor stoppages well in advance, so he was able to work with clients to get ready for tougher times. But clients—and advisors—need to be ready for the next disruption.

“We could see the strikes coming a little bit more easily than maybe some other things,” Fishman says. “But they still reinforce why it’s so important to be prepared for life’s uncertainties and eventualities.”

Clients like that approach, and Fishman’s affable and humble nature. He has built a formidable roster over the last 28 years, mainly through referrals. Assets had grown to over \$2 billion by mid-November, up from roughly \$1 billion four years ago. The firm serves 1,200 households, about \$2 million for the average client.

Fishman’s financial planning work includes the full range of services, such as reviews of assets and liabilities, strategies for cash flow and budgeting, liability and risk management, education planning, pension analysis, retirement income and lifestyle planning, estate planning, tax minimization strategies, and coordination with tax and legal advisors. The firm also handles investment management and private wealth management. Fees are generally 1%, but financial planning fees can range from \$600, all the way up to \$100,000 for complex financial issues, more suited to his wealthiest clients.

No matter the level of wealth, with the financial world constantly in flux, Fishman says it’s important to keep a close eye on people’s finances. “We try to meet with clients regularly,” he says. “That communication helps you be able to work with them to make good decisions.”

Interest rates drive part of the conversation today. One obvious action is to put cash into instruments with some yield, such as money market funds, U.S. Treasuries, and short-term bond funds.

Fishman has also pressed clients who didn't make much income last year to do Roth IRA conversions. "Every calamity is also an opportunity," Fishman says. "You just have to figure out where it is."

Interest in Law, Passion for Finance

Fishman developed his passion for finance while growing up in Hancock Park in Los Angeles. His father and grandfather were major role models. His dad ran an insurance brokerage, pushing him to think about personal finance. From his grandfather, he learned how to not get too emotional and try to make good decisions.

He went to college at Yeshiva University in New York, majoring in economics and communications, then earned his law degree from Yeshiva's Cardozo School of Law, focusing on tax and estate planning. He returned to L.A. in 1992 to work as an associate at a law firm but knew he



didn't want to practice law for the long haul. He enrolled in a financial planning program at the University of California, Los Angeles in 1994, completing it in 1995.

"I realized the impact I could have on people," Fishman says. "Financial decisions need to be well-thought-out. And they could be different for everybody, depending on what their situation is. That's what resonated with me."

He opened his practice in 1996, gaining clients by conducting continuing education classes for lawyers on topics such as income tax, estate planning, pensions, and business formation. Some of those early clients are now general counsels of major corporations, studio heads, or running successful businesses.

Personal relationships also led to clients. Via a young couples group through the Jewish Federation, Fishman befriended J. Brian Gadinsky, a producer who had worked on TV shows such as America's Most Wanted and American Gladiators. Gadinsky hired Fishman to help with his financial planning. Gadinsky, who would go on to serve as executive producer for many more shows, including American Idol, introduced Fishman to other friends in the industry. (Gadinsky is still a client and a close friend today.)

As the firm grew, Fishman hired his brother, Mordechai Fishman, in 2004 as a financial planner. His wife, Shari, joined the firm in 2010 as chief compliance officer. The firm now has six financial planners, and employee retention is high. "Clients have been dealing with the same people here now for a couple of decades or longer," Fishman says. "That has been a major part of our success, the continuity and consistency."

Jeff Fishman, JD, PFP, founder, JSF Financial.

How he caught our eye: Helped clients navigate recent strikes in Hollywood by Writers Guild of America and SAG-Aftra.

Career path: Graduated from Yeshiva University in 1989, then obtained a law degree from the institution's Cardozo School of Law in 1992. He first worked as an associate at a local law firm, then enrolled in a financial planning program at

UCLA in 1994, where he earned a personal financial planning designation in 1995. He opened his financial practice in 1996. Fishman also sits on the State Bar of California.

Personal: Married to Shari Fishman, chief compliance officer of the firm. They have two daughters, 26 and 19, and a son, 23. Jeff and Shari met in law school and got married shortly after that. Fishman is a Los Angeles sports fan, often going to Dodgers and Rams games.

Fishman uses model portfolios ranging from conservative to aggressive, using a blend of exchange-traded funds and mutual funds. For clients with greater assets, Fishman will layer on third-party money managers, such as in alternatives. A longtime user of Morningstar products, he relies on Morningstar Direct to track the model portfolios and conduct research on products. He also uses Morningstar Office for client portfolio analysis and proposals, including Portfolio X-Ray and Quick Snapshot reports.

It's all part of Fishman's process to build wealth for his clients and, as the recent strikes showed, prepare them for the next rainy day. "You really have to be prepared in life for some kind of an unforeseen change," Fishman says. "Something that you can't predict."