

Investment Perspectives

March 2026

Thinking Beyond the Benchmark

Seeking quality in Small-Mid Cap Core for better risk-adjusted performance

Active or Passive?

In our opinion, so much of today’s investment advice boils down to this simple, perhaps overly simplistic, question: “Should I pay for active management with the hopes of generating excess investment returns or should I ‘buy the benchmark’ through a lower-cost index fund?” In the race for investment returns, index investing can make a compelling case when compared with many active strategies, whose excess returns, if any, may be offset by fees.

Still, the U.S. small-mid cap asset class seems to provide ample room for skilled active managers to outperform the benchmark. The chart on the next page (Small-Mid Cap Core Universe Comparison) shows the Russell 2500 Index performance against quartile breakouts of performance by active managers in the asset class. It is clear that many, if not most, active managers have outperformed the benchmark across all the time periods analyzed. Put another way, the index has consistently fallen in the bottom half of all observable active managers in this asset class on an annualized basis.

How these active managers achieve their excess returns and what corresponding risks are taken can vary widely. We believe investors should pay close attention to how active managers achieve their returns over multiple time periods, focusing on the consistency of excess returns.

Quality of Holdings

We feel investors should review the quality of the underlying holdings in the portfolios of active managers. In our view, the quality of the underlying businesses held in a portfolio is a key factor in the consistency of investment performance and risk management.

We believe that investing in quality businesses is an important contributor to lowering portfolio risk in an effort to capture greater risk-adjusted returns relative not just to the specific asset-class benchmark, but to the overall equity market.

Quality and risk management may seem like secondary factors during periods when the U.S. equity markets are advancing in a consistent manner and in particularly pronounced bull markets. However, in our experience, quality companies tend to stand out when equity markets correct. It is especially during these more volatile periods—when investors have a tendency to seek more stable assets—that we believe quality and risk management count.



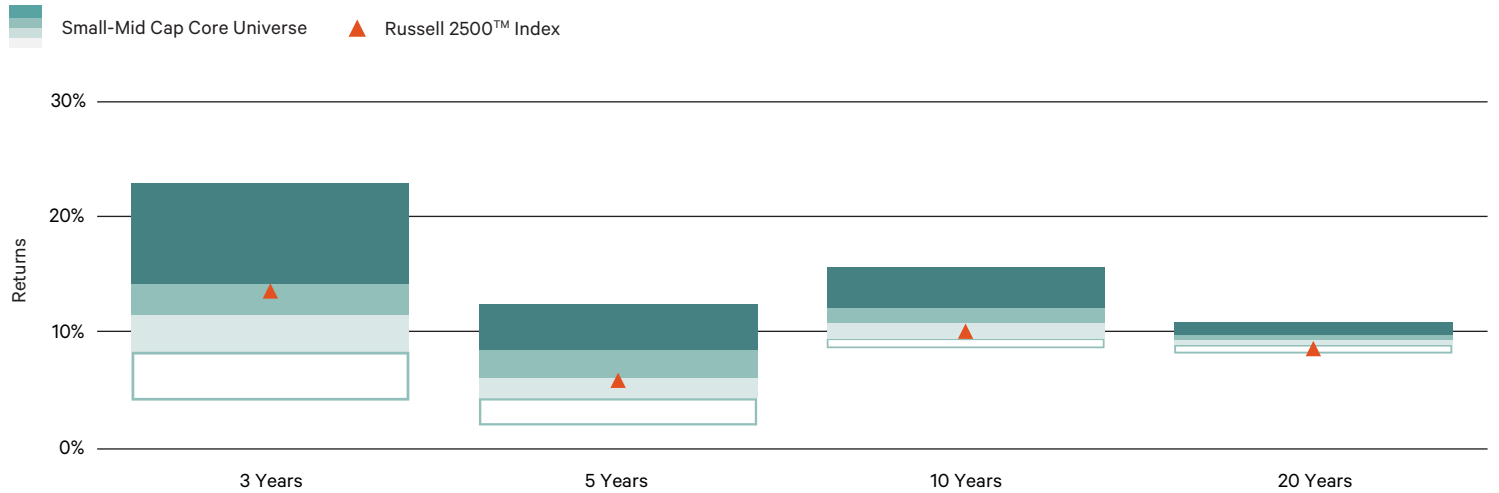
Our mission is identifying the highest quality businesses in which to invest. Benchmarks, in our view, are not built with the same discretion.

Percent of Unprofitable Companies:

KAR Small-Mid Cap Core:	3%
Russell 2500™ Index:	36%

*Data as of March 31, 2026.
Source: FactSet Research Systems.
Unprofitable companies are defined as those companies with zero or negative net profits.*

SMALL-MID CAP CORE UNIVERSE COMPARISON: Annualized Returns



Periods ending March 31, 2026. Source: FactSet Research Systems. The Small-Mid Cap Core Universe includes all managers categorized in the Small-Mid Cap Core asset class by eVestment. Please see additional disclosures presented at the bottom of the last page. **Past performance is no guarantee of future results.**

Profiting from Companies with Strong Fundamentals

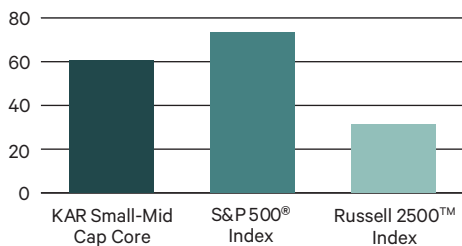
We believe that analyses of any of KAR’s actively managed investments will provide a clear view into how the quality of underlying holdings affects the portfolio overall. Specifically, we think a look at our Small-Mid Cap Core strategy will demonstrate the importance of quality and risk management in long-term outperformance.

This strategy invests in the small-to-medium company universe and is benchmarked to the Russell 2500 Index. Take a look at the following charts that compare the KAR portfolio companies against the holdings in its benchmark and in the broad stock market, represented by the S&P 500 Index.

What’s In Our Investment Portfolio?

HIGH-QUALITY STOCKS

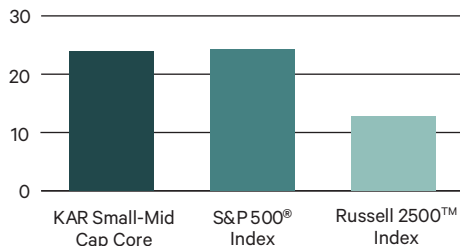
Percentage of Holdings with S&P Quality Rankings* of B+ or Above



We seek the benefits of small company exposure, with higher-quality stocks.

PROFITS

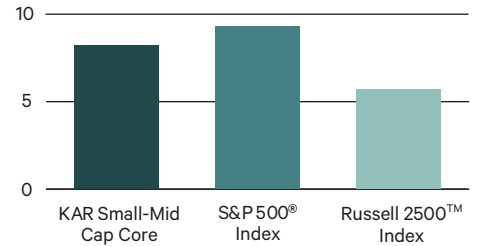
Five-Year Return on Equity



Profitable companies can produce better returns and are more likely to be sustainable in volatile markets.

DEBT COVERAGE

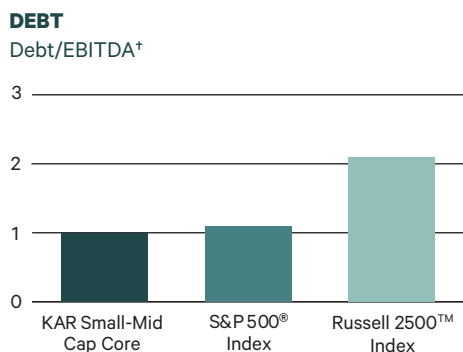
Interest Coverage Expense Ratio



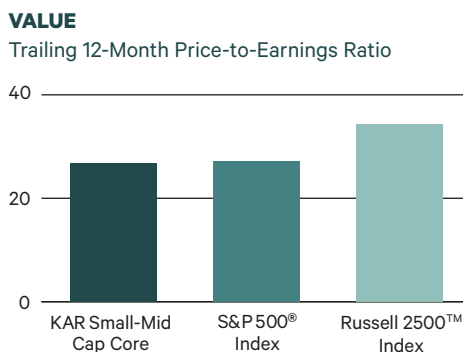
In our view, a higher interest coverage percentage means companies can more easily pay their debts.

*S&P Quality Rankings are letter grades assigned to a company based on a variety of factors, chief among them is the consistency of earnings and dividend growth over the prior 10 years.

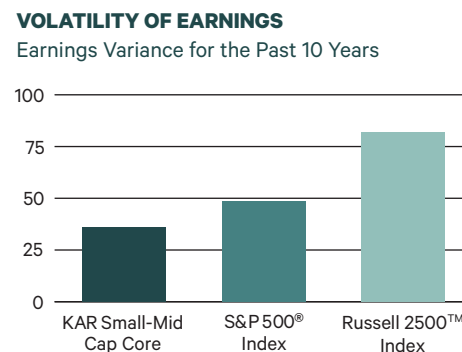
Data as of March 31, 2026. Source: FactSet Research Systems and BNY Mellon. Other principal consultant firms may use different algorithms to calculate selected statistics. Estimates are based on certain assumptions and historical information. To the extent actual performance results are shown in comparison to an index, the index is not actively managed and does not reflect the deduction of any investment management or other fees and expenses. Indices are not available for direct investment. This information is being provided by Kayne Anderson Rudnick Investment Management, LLC (“KAR”) for illustrative purposes only. This material is deemed supplemental and complements the performance and disclosure presented on the last page. **Past performance is no guarantee of future results.**



Less debt translates to more free cash flow to fund future growth.



Stocks with lower P/E ratios trade at a relative discount and have room to grow.



Lower variance indicates that companies have more predictable earnings over time. Getting smaller-company exposure at a level of earnings variance similar to that found in larger companies.

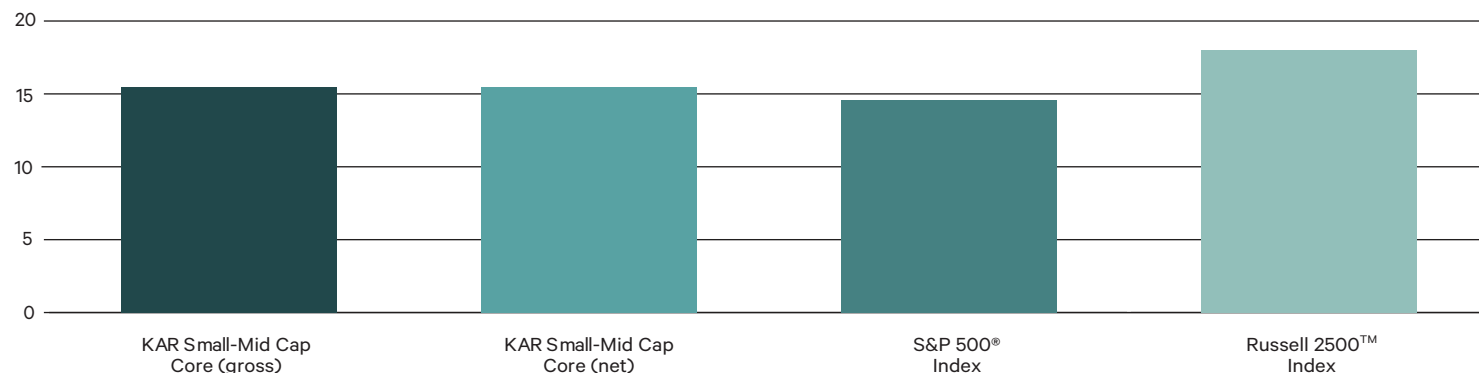
*KAR utilizes the interquartile method when calculating Debt/EBITDA. The interquartile method excludes outliers from an aggregate statistic such as weighted average. The interquartile method does not assume that data from the top or bottom of the distribution are outliers—only the extreme ends are excluded—and that it can be applied consistently as a quantitative method for most fundamental characteristics. Debt/EBITDA utilizes net debt for the calculation. Data as of March 31, 2026. Source: FactSet Research Systems and BNY Mellon. Other principal consultant firms may use different algorithms to calculate selected statistics. Estimates are based on certain assumptions and historical information. To the extent actual performance results are shown in comparison to an index, the index is not actively managed and does not reflect the deduction of any investment management or other fees and expenses. Indices are not available for direct investment. This information is being provided by Kayne Anderson Rudnick Investment Management, LLC (“KAR”) for illustrative purposes only. This material is deemed supplemental and complements the performance and disclosure presented on the last page. **Past performance is no guarantee of future results.**

Quality As an Offset to Volatility

The flip side of returns is risk, and in our experience, risk management is an important facet of how KAR manages its strategies. We have seen volatility return to the stock market this year after having been largely absent for some time. Volatility in the stock market is normal, and given that the markets continue to see pressure from investor uncertainty over the course of inflation and interest rates, we believe now is an even more important time to be focusing on risk management.

Risk can be described as variability of returns. Stocks with smaller market capitalizations are generally known for not only their potential to deliver excess returns over larger stocks, but also for their potential for higher risk, commonly represented by standard deviation. Our Small-Mid Cap Core portfolio, despite its focus on the small-to-mid capitalization range, maintains a risk profile that is equivalent to that of the S&P 500, which comprises the 500 largest U.S. companies.

ANNUALIZED STANDARD DEVIATION



Data presented is since the inception of the KAR Small-Mid Cap Core strategy, April 1, 1992 through March 31, 2026. Source: FactSet Research Systems. Please see additional disclosures presented at the bottom of the last page. This material is deemed supplemental and complements the performance and disclosure presented on the last page. **Past performance is no guarantee of future results.**

The standard deviation metrics on the prior page divided into the annual returns of the respective indices result in the following return-per-unit-of-risk measures:

	Annualized Return	Standard Deviation	Return/Risk
KAR Small-Mid Cap Core (gross)	10.91	15.46	0.71
KAR Small-Mid Cap Core (net)	9.49	15.46	0.61
S&P 500® Index	10.64	14.60	0.73
Russell 2500™ Index	10.37	17.99	0.58

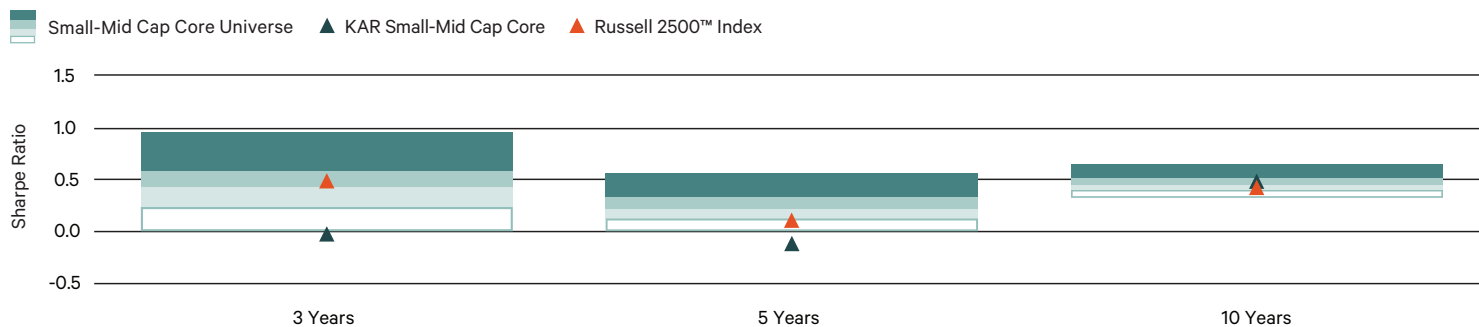
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The return-per-unit-of-risk figure is a ratio that compares a strategy’s returns to the standard deviation of those returns, showing the relationship between a strategy’s performance and the risk associated with the generation of that performance. The higher the ratio, the better the risk-adjusted return.

We believe due to these lower risk measures, the KAR Small-Mid Cap Core portfolio has provided better risk-adjusted returns over the observed years than its benchmark and many of its peers. The following quartile analyses show that our portfolio outpaces most others in the small-mid cap universe in terms of annualized alpha and the Sharpe ratio.

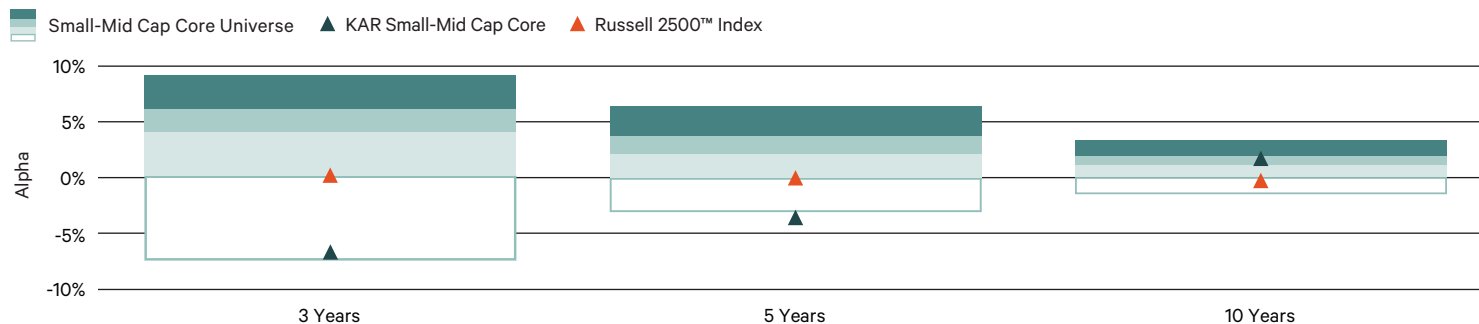
SMALL-MID CAP CORE UNIVERSE COMPARISON

Sharpe Ratio



SMALL-MID CAP CORE UNIVERSE COMPARISON

Annualized Alpha



Data as of March 31, 2026. Source: FactSet Research Systems. The eVestment Small-Mid Cap Core Universe includes 92, 88 and 58 managers for the 3, 5 and 10 Year time periods, respectively, categorized in the small-mid cap core asset class by eVestment. KAR does not pay any fees to be included in the eVestment Small-Mid Cap Core Universe or for the ranking itself. KAR does pay fees for the use of certain products and services provided by eVestment. eVestment rankings are based on gross of fee returns. Gross of fee returns will be reduced by investment management fees and other expenses that may be incurred in the management of the account. Management fees are described in KAR’s Form ADV Part 2A, which is available upon request and can also be found at <https://kayne.com/wp-content/uploads/ADV-Part-2A.pdf>. Please see additional disclosures presented at the bottom of the last page. **Past performance is no guarantee of future results.**



A concept in behavioral finance known as prospect theory tells us that investors feel the impact of negative returns more deeply than positive ones. At KAR, we strive to remain defensive even in the worst markets.

Downside Capture Through the Years

In our view, the following chart illustrates that the KAR Small-Mid Cap Core strategy also has maintained consistent downside-capture ratios below 100 percent across its lifetime, meaning it has lost less than its benchmark during periods of negative returns for the benchmark. At the end of the day, we believe investors want an investment strategy that fulfills a beneficial function to their portfolios—return generation or risk mitigation, or a combination of both. Returns and risk must always be observed together, and we at KAR strive to be highly disciplined in balancing the two components of investing. A commitment to quality stocks and mindful risk management is the foundation of our investment discipline, and we believe the Small-Mid Cap Core strategy is an efficient diversification component in an investor’s portfolio.

ROLLING 3-YEAR DOWNSIDE CAPTURE %

KAR Small-Mid Cap Core (Net)



Data presented is since the inception of the KAR Small-Mid Cap Core strategy, April 1, 1992 through March 31, 2026. Source: FactSet Research Systems. **Past performance is no guarantee of future results.**

ANNUALIZED RETURNS

	1 Year	5 Years	10 Years
KAR Small-Mid Cap Core (gross)	(6.55%)	1.46%	11.10%
KAR Small-Mid Cap Core (net)	(7.76%)	0.15%	9.68%
Russell 2500™ Index	23.45%	5.48%	10.58%

The performance figures presented above are final and are net of fees unless otherwise specified. Net of fees returns reflect the payment of investment management fees and in some instances, other fees and expenses. KAR’s investment management fees are described in KAR’s Form ADV, Part 2A. Fees presented on the Disclosure page could vary from the assumed fee in the net-of-fee calculation, as actual fees paid by a particular client account differ depending on a variety of factors including, but not limited to, business unit and size of mandate. The fee used on the Disclosure page utilizes an assumed maximum fee across the firm’s business units, which is further detailed on that page. All periods less than one year are total returns for the noted timeframe and are not annualized. All rates of return include reinvested dividends and other earnings. Current performance may be lower or higher than the performance data shown. This material is deemed supplemental and complements the performance and disclosure presented on the last page and included in KAR’s strategy fact sheets available on kayne.com. To the extent actual performance results are shown in comparison to an index, the index is not actively managed and does not reflect the deduction of any investment management or other fees and expenses. Indices are not available for direct investment. This information is being provided by Kayne Anderson Rudnick Investment Management, LLC (“KAR”) for illustrative purposes only. Source: FactSet Research Systems. Returns may be affected by currency fluctuations. **Past performance is no guarantee of future results.**

Disclosure

Year	Composite Gross Return (%)	Composite Net Return (%)	Russell 2500™ Index Return (%)	Composite 3-Yr Std Dev (%)	Benchmark 3-Yr Std Dev (%)	Number of Accounts	Internal Dispersion (%)	Composite Assets (\$ Millions)	Firm Assets (\$ Millions)
2015	6.16	4.80	(2.90)	12.23	12.59	18	0.23	21	8,095
2016	17.30	15.80	17.59	12.63	13.86	39	0.13	34	9,989
2017	19.84	18.31	16.81	11.15	12.31	83	0.32	137	14,609
2018	(4.17)	(5.41)	(10.00)	13.32	14.30	92	0.29	111	17,840
2019	40.77	39.00	27.77	14.87	14.79	135	0.69	225	25,685
2020	36.34	34.61	19.99	21.16	24.55	190	1.44	1,008	39,582
2021	20.81	19.27	18.18	19.01	22.80	319	0.28	2,031	47,269
2022	(23.14)	(24.15)	(18.37)	23.20	25.52	363	0.38	1,863	33,531
2023	24.93	23.34	17.42	20.94	20.43	366	0.54	2,657	41,186
2024	10.06	8.65	12.00	21.74	22.01	373	0.29	3,373	45,494

The Russell 2500™ Index is a trademark/service mark of Frank Russell Company. Russell® is a trademark of Frank Russell Company.

KAR (as defined below) claims compliance with the Global Investment Performance Standards (GIPS®) and has prepared and presented this report in compliance with the GIPS® standards. KAR has been independently verified for the period from January 1, 1999 through December 31, 2024.

A firm that claims compliance with the GIPS standards must establish policies and procedures for complying with all the applicable requirements of the GIPS standards. Verification provides assurance on whether the firm’s policies and procedures related to composite, as well as the calculation, presentation, and distribution of performance, have been designed in compliance with the GIPS standards and have been implemented on a firm-wide basis.

The Small-Mid Cap Core Composite has had a performance examination for the period from January 1, 1999 through December 31, 2024. The verification and performance examination reports are available upon request.

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The composite includes all fully discretionary institutional and pooled Small-Mid Cap Core Portfolios. Small-Mid Cap Core Portfolios are invested in equity securities with market capitalizations consistent with the Russell 2500™ Index, that have market control, rising free cash flow, shareholder-oriented management, strong consistent profit growth and low-debt balance sheets. For comparison purposes, the composite is measured against the Russell 2500™ Index. The Russell 2500™ Index is a market capitalization-weighted index of the 2,500 smallest companies in the Russell Universe, which comprises the 3,000 largest U.S. companies. The index is calculated on a total-return basis with dividends

reinvested. Benchmark returns are not covered by the report of the independent verifiers. The inception date of the composite is April 1992. The composite was created in July 2000. Policies for valuing investments, calculating performance, and preparing GIPS Reports are available upon request. The firm’s list of composite descriptions, list of broad distribution pooled fund and the list of limited distribution pooled funds descriptions are available upon request.

The model management fee used for the net returns in this table is 1.30% for all periods presented. The standard Institutional management fee schedule currently in effect is as follows: 0.85% for the first \$25 million; 0.75% on the next \$25 million; 0.70% on the next \$50 million; 0.60% on the balance. The maximum Wealth Advisory Services Fee in effect is 1.30% for all assets, which breaks out as follows: 1.00% for the first \$3 million; 0.80% on the next \$2 million; 0.70% on the next \$5 million; 0.60% on the balance; with an additional 0.30% for any assets invested in separately managed accounts strategies. The standard investment advisory fee schedule currently in effect for clients not engaging in Wealth Advisory Services is 1.00%. Actual management fees charged may vary depending on applicable fee schedules and portfolio size, among other things. Additional information may be found in Part 2A of Form ADV, which is available on request. The performance information is supplied for reference. Past performance is no guarantee of future results. Results will vary among accounts. The U.S. dollar is the currency used to express performance. Returns are presented net of transaction fees and include the reinvestment of all income. Gross returns will be reduced by investment management fees and other expenses that may be incurred in the management of the account. Model net returns have been calculated by deducting 1/12th of the highest tier of the standard management fee schedule in effect for the respective period from the gross composite returns on a monthly basis.

Internal dispersion is calculated using the asset-weighted standard deviation of annual gross returns for accounts in the composite for the entire year. For those years when less than five accounts were included for the full year, no dispersion measure is presented. The three-year annualized ex-post standard deviation measures the variability of the composite (using gross returns) and the benchmark for the 36-month period.

The Russell 2500™ Index is a free float-adjusted market capitalization-weighted index of the 2,500 smallest companies in the Russell Universe, which comprises the 3,000 largest U.S. companies. The S&P 500 Index is a market capitalization-weighted index which includes 500 of the largest companies in leading industries of the U.S. economy. The indexes are calculated on a total return basis with dividends reinvested. The indexes are unmanaged, their returns do not reflect any fees, expenses, or sales charges, and they are not available for direct investment. This information is being provided by Kayne Anderson Rudnick Investment Management, LLC (“KAR”) for illustrative purposes only.

EBITDA (Earnings Before Interest, Taxes, Depreciation and Amortization): A measure of a company’s overall financial performance and is used as an alternative to net income in some circumstances. Alpha: A risk-adjusted measure of an investment’s excess return relative to a benchmark. Sharpe Ratio: A risk-adjusted measure calculated using standard deviation and excess return to determine reward per unit of risk. The higher the Sharpe Ratio, the better. Standard Deviation: Measures variability of returns around the average turn for an investment portfolio. Higher standard deviation suggests greater risk.