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Survey Respondents Give High Marks to Firm for Service and Performance

The firm's individual tax clients are overwhelmingly pleased with the services that Whalen & Company provides them, based on the results of a survey conducted during the past tax season.

Nearly 100 percent of the respondents indicated they were extremely satisfied or satisfied with the firm's services. Seventy-three percent expressed extreme satisfaction.

Regarding the value received from the firm's services compared to the cost, most respondents, 91 percent, gave excellent or good ratings with nearly two-thirds of the respondents rating the value they received as excellent.

Survey Scope and Timing

The survey covered client views about overall service as well as specific areas related to the delivery of services, communications and educational programs for clients. For the most part, the questions were multiple choice or yes/no type responses.

The survey was conducted between February 10 and April 29. Clients could take the survey online or complete a questionnaire that was included in tax return packets and return it by mail or fax. Approximately 18 percent of the firm's tax clients responded.

IRS Increases Standard Mileage Rate, Starting July 1

In response to rising gasoline prices, the IRS has raised the standard mileage rate for business use of an automobile from 51 cents per mile to 55-1/2 per mile, effective July 1.

The medical and moving standard mileage rate is increasing from 19 cents per mile to 23-1/2 per mile, also on July 1.

The new rates can be used by taxpayers to calculate the deductible costs of operating an automobile. Alternatively, taxpayers can instead use their actual costs, but must maintain adequate records and be able to substantiate their expenses.

The standard mileage rate for services to charitable organizations is set by statute at 14 cents per mile and remains unchanged.

The former rates continue to apply to expenses incurred before July 1, 2011.

Assessment of Service

The survey also asked clients to assess 12 qualities that the firm uses as part of its quality-service standards for clients. The percentage of respondents who either strongly agreed or agreed that staff members were demonstrating these qualities ranged from 100 percent to 89 percent.

On nine of the 12 service traits, 95 percent to 100 percent of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed. The results on each quality are indicated in the chart below.

Staying with the Firm

Ninety-three percent of the respondents said they would continue to obtain services with the firm in the future, and the same percentage

indicated they would recommend the services of Whalen to someone they know.

Topping the list of what clients liked best about the firm was Whalen's staff, followed by confidence in the quality of work, knowledge and expertise, and personal attention and service.

One client commented, "My tax adviser takes time to answer my questions and has made suggestions that helped me reduce my tax liability. The company's employees are very professional and courteous."

Another wrote, "I have confidence that the company keeps current on tax changes as well as my situation."

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Percentage of Respondents Who Strongly Agree or Agree with the Following Service-Related Statements



NEWS BRIEFS

Charitable Deductions for Out-of-Pocket Expenses Allowed

Taxpayers are allowed to take charitable deductions for unreimbursed out-of-pocket expenses incurred in performing donated services for a charity.

This allowance was upheld in a recent court case where the tax court found a taxpayer's expenses in caring for foster cats in her home as a volunteer for a nonprofit Section 501(c)(3) organization specializing in care of wild cats were qualified unreimbursed expenses. Expenses incurred by the taxpayer included household utilities.

For more information about charitable deductions, contact your tax adviser.

Limits of HSA Deductible Contributions Rise Slightly

The annual caps on deductible contributions to HSAs will inch up in 2012. The ceilings will increase slightly to \$6,250 for an individual with family coverage and to \$3,100 for self-only coverage. Folks born before 1958 can put in \$1,000 more.

Limits on out-of-pocket costs, such as deductibles and copayments, will also rise to \$12,100 for persons with family coverage and to \$6,050 for individual coverage.

Minimum policy deductibles will remain at \$2,400 for families and \$1,200 for singles.

Make Sure Your 401(k) Plan Beneficiaries Are Properly Designated

Failing to change a plan beneficiary the right way can be costly to your heirs.

A 401(k) plan provided that if a participant died, the account would go to the spouse unless the spouse agreed to waive his or her rights as a beneficiary.

A plan member designated his three adult children as beneficiaries after his first wife passed away. He eventually remarried, but died six weeks later. Both his kids and his new spouse claimed the balance left in his 401(k) plan, and a district court awarded it to his wife because a spousal waiver was never executed.

Firm Receives Two National Awards

For the second consecutive year Whalen & Company has won two national awards for the firm's commitment to client service and the quality of its staff.

Tracy Ceritelli has been named the Top Director of First Impressions.

The firm also received the top marketing award for its efforts in reinforcing the importance of Five-Star client service, excellence and teamwork among staff.

Enterprise Worldwide, an international alliance of independent accounting firms, presented the awards to the firm in June.

Survey Respondents Give High Marks to Firm—continued

Ways to Improve

Nineteen suggestions were made on ways the firm could improve. A number of clients commented about making sure fees remained competitive or lowering fees. Others focused on tax-saving ideas and communications.

"We are pleased with the positive feedback and the suggestions on areas where we can improve," said Partner Richard Crabtree, who oversees the firm's tax department. "Our goal is to provide the best possible service to all of our clients."

Regarding the value of publications prepared for clients, respondents generally gave good marks. Eighty-six percent rated both the 1040 Briefing newsletter and the tax planning letter/publication as excellent or good; about 13 percent hadn't read the publications or didn't express a view.

More than two-thirds of the respondents had not visited the firm's Web site. Those who did, visited the site predominantly to learn information about staff or the firm's services.

News about the firm and the calculation

tools were reasons cited by a substantial number of respondents.

The use of social media tools was not prevalent among respondents. The percentage of respondents who do not use these services was: 66 percent for Facebook; 78 percent, LinkedIn; and 94 percent, Twitter. About 30 percent indicated they used Facebook for personal purposes.

Workshop topics that had the most appeal for respondents included estate planning, retirement planning, tax planning and personal financial planning.

Approximately two-thirds of the respondents were long-term clients, ranging from seven to more than 20 years of experience with the firm. Three percent had been with the firm for less than a year; 16 percent, 1 to 3 years; and 13 percent, 4 to 6 years.

Half of the respondents had been referred to the firm by a friend, family member or business colleague; 16 percent knew a member of the firm, and 5 percent chose the firm because of its reputation. 🏆

Social Security As a Part of Your Retirement Income Plan

Are you one of 77 million Baby Boomers approaching retirement? The oldest person of the baby-boom generation turned 65 on January 1, 2011.

This individual is less than one year from reaching his or her full retirement age of 66. Full retirement age for those born between 1943 and 1954 is age 66.

Do you know what this means to you? If you are eligible to start receiving benefits, should you apply?

In working with those of you in the Baby-Boom generation, I run in to all sorts of questions about Social Security.

Here are a few of the more common questions:

- Will Social Security be there for me when I retire?
- How much can I expect to receive?
- When should I apply for Social Security?
- How can I maximize my benefits?
- Will Social Security be enough to live on in retirement?

All of these questions are important and need to be addressed. Social Security is a foundation to any retirement income plan for each and every one of us.

The key is to plan properly and take your benefits when they benefit you the most. To determine how Social Security fits with your plans, you should consider the following issues:

- What is your current health status?
- How long do you think you will live?
- What is your need for income?

- Do you plan to continue to work?
- What type of needs do your survivors have?

It is important to remember that you are not alone and there are numerous resources you can rely on.

First and foremost, there is your annual benefits statement to get started. In addition, the Social Security Web site, www.socialsecurity.gov, has vast amounts of information and numerous calculators to assist you.

Finally, the Bishoff Financial Group offers a free workshop entitled "Savvy Social Security Planning: What Baby Boomers Need to Know to Maximize Retirement Income."

We conducted two workshop sessions for Whalen clients in June and had a good response. Twenty-one people attended.

Some had already started to work their way through the details of the program, and there were many questions and issues raised.

If you would like to attend any future sessions on this topic, please call us at 614-471-2211.

Wm. Eric Bishoff in his 18th year in the financial services industry serves as the branch manager of The Bishoff Financial Group. Whalen & Company works with The Bishoff Financial Group as an alliance partner for financial services. Securities offered through LPL Financial, Member FINRA/SIPC.

