



Navigating a Challenging Environment for Growth Stocks

We are positioned relatively defensively amid rate headwinds

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KEY INSIGHTS

- Large-cap growth stocks have struggled as Russia's invasion of Ukraine has compounded interest rate and inflation fears.
- Our price discipline led us to miss out on some of the market's most highly valued stocks over the past couple of years but has been a tailwind recently.
- We remain positioned relatively defensively as we expect growth stock valuations to move back more in line with longer-term averages.

While multiyear gains for large-cap growth stocks were fueled in part by innovation and earnings growth, a highly accommodative Federal Reserve and strong investor sentiment propelled segments of the market to extreme valuations. To date in 2022, many growth stocks have undergone a sharp correction driven by rising interest rates, inflation, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

T. Rowe Price has been investing in growth stocks since 1950, and our total large-cap growth equity assets under management exceed USD 343 billion (as of March 31, 2022)¹. Our extensive U.S. small-/mid-cap and non-U.S. research and portfolio management resources further complement our large-cap growth investing activities. Our experience shows that companies

positioned to exploit change have been among the most durable growth investments.

Taymour Tamaddon's investment experience began in 2003, and he has been with T. Rowe Price since 2004. Prior to this, Taymour was employed by Amazon.com in the areas of finance and merchandising and was previously employed by Booz Allen Hamilton as a consultant. Taymour earned a B.S., cum laude, in applied physics from Cornell University and an M.B.A. from Dartmouth College, Tuck School of Business, where he was an Edward Tuck Scholar with high distinction.

In this Q&A, Taymour discusses the current environment for large-cap growth stocks, his outlook for the asset class, and how he is positioning the portfolio in response.



Taymour Tamaddon
Portfolio Manager, Large-Cap Growth Fund

¹ The combined U.S. Large-Cap Growth Equity assets managed by T. Rowe Price Associates, Inc. and its investment advisory affiliates.

Q: How would you summarize the market environment for growth stocks?

The last five years have been unprecedented in many ways. Over that period, large-cap growth stocks have seen their strongest returns since the late 1990s. The Russell 1000 Growth Index has also become highly concentrated. At their peak last August, the top five stocks by market capitalization accounted for nearly 40% of the index. Meanwhile, expanding multiples,² rather than earnings and cash flows, have driven most of the index's appreciation. In sum, the market has been going through a highly unusual period in which multiple appreciation has been driving the preponderance of the strong returns of a very concentrated index.

Q: How has this environment affected your investment strategy?

We focus on estimating a company's growth rate, durability, and growth potential—and correspondingly spend much less time thinking about how its multiple might evolve. This is based on our belief that the biggest durable advantage you can have as an investor is correctly analyzing a company's potential earnings and free cash flow growth.

As part of this process, we develop three-year price targets for a stock, which helps prevent us from selling a position either much too early or much too late. Many large-cap growth stocks have well exceeded our price targets since the fund's inception in May 2020, encouraging us to sell and leading us to miss out on some of their spectacular gains; over the first quarter, however, this price discipline helped our relative performance.

Q: What was COVID's impact on the fund's relative performance?³

We correctly anticipated many of the first-order impacts of the virus on stocks

in our investment universe—to take one example, the boost it would provide online auto retailers. As it turned out, however, the second-order impacts of the virus—in terms of the massive fiscal and monetary relief efforts—played a much larger role in driving markets. Extremely low interest rates played a key role in favoring the fastest-growing stocks and pushing their valuation multiples well past our price targets.

Q: What are your thoughts on two key growth markets: electric vehicles (EVs) and financial technology (fintech)?

There is a lot of excitement around EVs, and valuations are extended, in some cases. We still believe the industry is ripe with opportunity for investors; we just think some of the best prospects lie beyond the high-profile names, such as Tesla. In particular, we are especially interested in the crucial EV supply chain. Two of our recent investments have been in smaller, private companies that we think have long growth runways in the resource-constrained battery market. One provides battery recycling services, and the other provides a technology that improves battery performance.

A word about Rivian: The stock has pulled back dramatically from its highs shortly after its IPO last November, and it took a sizable toll on our first-quarter performance. If the company can leverage its contract to supply delivery vehicles to Amazon and dominate the embryonic EV truck market, we still see strong upside potential. Of course, that's not guaranteed.

In fintech, we are interested in some of the legacy payments firms, such as Fiserv and Global Payments. Both companies are investing in new technologies and seem poised to survive and possibly thrive—but they still

² As typically defined by the multiple of a stock's price relative to the company's earnings or book value per share.

³ Past performance is not a reliable indicator of future performance. Relative performance is performance compared to the benchmark, the Russell 1000 Growth Index.


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trade at a healthy discount to the overall market because investors are skeptical that they can keep up with change and new entrants in the industry. I see some parallels with Microsoft, which some were prepared to write off about six years ago because of competition from Amazon Web Services and others.

Q: How is Russia's invasion of Ukraine likely to affect growth stocks?

At the start of 2022, I was hopeful that inflation would moderate meaningfully in the second half of the year, but I now think the increases in oil prices and other commodities following Russia's invasion are likely to keep it elevated for the duration of 2022. Many executives are telling me that they plan to implement additional price increases, if they haven't already.

The war is also going to have an impact on consumer confidence and, therefore, spending. The war is already weighing on consumers in Eastern Europe, of course, but we're also seeing early signs of an impact on consumer attitudes in Western Europe. How it will affect the U.S. consumer is harder to gauge given that year-over-year comparisons are already muddied by the stimulus checks sent out in the spring of 2021.

Q: What is your outlook for the market given these headwinds?

I envision two scenarios. In the first, investors anticipate a coming recession

as inflation persists and the Fed reacts, meaning valuations could continue to compress over the next three to six months. In this scenario, given our long-term orientation, I would position the portfolio more aggressively.

In the second, the Fed engineers a soft landing, raising rates enough to cause inflation to decelerate but not so much to harm the economy. In this scenario, valuations may recover a bit from current levels and growth stocks could do pretty well over the next 12 to 18 months. But we would still expect growth stock valuations to normalize sometime over the next three years—keep in mind that, even after the recent pullback, aggressive growth stock valuations are still sitting at roughly 2019 levels. Exactly when and how quickly is very difficult to predict, however.

Q: How is this outlook reflected in your positioning?

The fund remains positioned defensively in this environment, although still in line with its growth mandate. We have allocated a larger-than-usual part of the fund to companies that should be less sensitive to interest rates or economic conditions, such as managed care companies. We also like discount retailers, which may even benefit from an economic slowdown and more cautious consumers.

As of March 31, 2022, Microsoft represented 11.1% of the Large-Cap Growth Fund, Amazon.com 9.4%, and Rivian Automotive 2.9%, placing them among the fund's top 10 holdings. Fiserv, Global Payments, and Tesla were smaller positions representing 1.9%, 1.6%, and 0.6%, respectively.

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