When He's Just Not That Into You

Some financial advisers are only "into" millionaires. But there are lots of ways to find one who won't make you sit by the phone

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Dear MONEY: My husband and I have finally built up a nest egg. It's still pretty modest by Wall Street standards, but big enough that we feel we need some professional help with our decisions. Problem is, the advisers we've called aren't exactly hot and heavy for our business. One said our portfolio wasn't big enough. Another didn't even return our calls. The guy who agreed to take us on as clients—and who we really like—seems to have committed his heart elsewhere. We feel like we're back in high school and can't get a date for the prom. Is there something wrong with us? Don't we deserve better?

SITTING BY THE PHONE

Dear Sitting: As you found out, lots of financial advisers these days won't take on new customers with portfolios of less than, say, $250,000, $500,000, even $1 million or more. Why? Many of them are paid a percentage of the money you have them managing, and they simply don't feel it's worth their time to service relatively small accounts.

In other words, this guy just isn't that into you. But better help—from someone who wants to help—is out there. The increasing number of options include networks of fee-only planners who focus on middle-income clients, a growing list of employers offering financial advisory services, and a wide range of financial companies that are adding low-cost advice to their services.

To choose, however, you first need to ask yourself what kind of help you need. Are you just looking for a qualified professional to answer one-shot questions about discrete topics? Or, at the other end of the spectrum, are you looking for an ongoing relationship with someone who can both answer questions as they pop up and oversee your long-term financial well-being? The answer will point you where you need to go.

If you want help with your portfolio Call up almost any large fund company or discount broker, and they'll be happy to offer some basic allocation guidance. But for a small fee, and in some cases just for putting a few thousand dollars in their care, these companies will customize their recommendations. There are usually several levels available, depending on whether you have money at the firm, and how much. But in most cases the basic thresholds are modest.

At T. Rowe Price, for example, you don't even need to be a customer; $250 will buy you at least two meetings with an investment specialist who will look at your goals and recommend portfolio allocations (as well as T. Rowe funds that would fit the bill, of course). And for a one-time $500 fee, T. Rowe Price offers soon-to-retire investors more sophisticated advice, over three or four meetings, on generating income from savings during retirement, plus annual reviews.

Vanguard offers free portfolio guidance to anyone rolling over $100,000 or more at the company, though the advice is by phone or e-mail, not in person. And anyone with $100,000 invested through Vanguard is allowed free access to Financial Engines, a highly regarded online suite of worksheets and calculators that generate customized retirement advice and investment recommendations, which usually costs $150 a year. Schwab, meanwhile, offers clients two portfolio consultations a year by phone for an annual fee of $1,000 or 0.5% of your assets, whichever is more. And Merrill Lynch offers limited advice, usually on assembling a fund portfolio, to clients with at least $20,000.

These are hardly the only financial companies that offer such services. When you call to make an appointment, just be sure you've chosen an outfit that pays its advisers salaries rather than commissions, which are sometimes incentives for selling you investment vehicles you don't need.

If all you need is one-time advice Maybe you simply want help determining how much house you can afford. Or what kind of life insurance you ought to get. Or maybe you'd like help launching a financial plan, but feel you can take it from there. In such cases, you want a professional opinion, but you probably don't need a comprehensive planner relationship or the fees that go with it. The answer: Hire a planner who works on a per-project or hourly basis.

One good place to start is your workplace. A growing number of 401(k) plan sponsors—more than 25%, in fact—are pointing their employees to outside investment advisory services. Scrutinize the list of benefits your company provides, or talk to your human-resources department. Typical offerings range from financial help call lines to online tools such as those provided by Financial Engines to lists of prescreened planners willing to discount their services.

Another good source is the website of the National Association of Personal Financial Advisors (napfa.org), where you can search for planners who specialize in "middle income" clients. (Start with a geographic search and narrow from there.) The Financial Planning Association consumer hotline (800-647-6340) will also point you to planners who work with modest portfolios.

Some companies specifically market to middle-income clients. The Garrett Planning Network (garrettplanningnetwork.com; 866-260-8400) is a nationwide group of some 240 fee-only planners who operate like lawyers, billing from $150 to $300 an hour, depending on the planner's location and area of expertise. All GPN members offer one free get-acquainted meeting.

Another group focused on this market is Myfinancialadvice.com. Its online database has 70 advisers listed with their backgrounds, specialties and photos. You go online, choose from a list of experts on the relevant topic (taxes, employee benefits, etc.) and send your question or to prospects you find promising—more than one, if you want. They respond with bids, and you can follow up with a phone call to help you settle on the adviser. A simple, 10-minute pros-and-cons discussion of "Should I rent or buy?" could cost as little as $20, says CEO Ron Peremel.

If you want ongoing planning At some point, you may feel you want a pro at your side for all your financial decisions—and you want it to be someone who sees the whole picture and can keep you on track toward your long-term goals. Again, fee-only planners—as opposed to those who make commissions for selling you investment products—are the way to go. But how do you find one you want to settle down with?

One good strategy is to start with a planner on an hourly or project basis and, if you're happy with the advice, sign on for more comprehensive service. In any case, Napfa.org provides a useful list of questions to ask a prospective planner. Barbara Roper, director of investor protection at the Consumer Federation of America, also suggests asking for the planner's definition of success. "The answer should be to help achieve the client's goals," she says. "Beware of the 'more-ons'—planners who say that 'more money' and 'a higher rate of return' is the goal. That narrow a focus is a danger sign." And finally, check out the above list of additional questions to help make sure your planner is, you know, into you.

Will He Treat You Right?

Five questions to ask a prospective financial planner

In some cases, there are no right or wrong answers. You just have to be comfortable with them—and how they're delivered.

1. I'm worried that because my portfolio is relatively modest I won't have your attention. Should I be concerned?
Question his sincerity if he laughs this one off altogether. No good planner has unlimited time to devote to one small portfolio.

2 How often can I expect you to check in with me?
Once a month would be ideal. Once a season is probably more realistic. Twice a year should be the bare minimum. The important thing is to agree on this point in advance.

3 How quickly will you get back to me with answers to a question?
Even a busy planner should return your calls within a day, two at the most. Answering a basic question about your holdings should take no more than a couple of days; allow a week or so to get back research on a particular investment.

4 What kind of advice can I expect to get?
Most planners will spend at least a few hours getting to know you, looking over your financial profile and discussing your long-term goals before developing a comprehensive financial plan. They should also talk about addressing tax and estate planning and life insurance.

5 What's your typical portfolio size?
Smaller than yours and you should question his experience and sophistication. Significantly bigger and you should make doubly sure you're satisfied with the answers to questions 1, 2 and 3.