

# Growth, value, quality and junk

Part 1: The quality of value is not strained<sup>1</sup>

David Walsh, Realindex Investments

For professional only

March 2023

## Introduction

In most walks of life, higher quality goods or services are deemed to be (or actually are) more expensive. These might be luxury goods and services, or premium products, or – in our case – higher quality companies. At the same time, lower quality items (at worst, let's call them 'junk') tend to be less expensive. However, is this actually (always) true? As we will see below, there is no question that higher quality firms are usually more expensive, but there are many cases and periods where they are not.

Part of the uncertainty of this arises because quality is such a subjective issue. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as they say. Within a certain budget (or investment universe) we can attempt to distinguish between good and poor quality, and choose good quality over poor, all else equal. These may not be the absolute highest quality, or indeed the most expensive.

But how do we tell if an item or a service is indeed higher quality, without perfect foresight?

In an investment sense, quality is also a slippery concept with many dimensions. A better quality company can be quantitatively assessed using a variety of measures, which look at one dimension or another, but a composite or holistic measure is not really available.

Most importantly in an investment sense, it is not just what we at Realindex believe is higher quality, *it is what the market believes*. That is, if higher quality firms are preferred to lower quality firms, they will see greater demand, and so will command higher prices. They will - on average - become more expensive.

In the absence of a holistic measure of quality, as usual, differences of opinion or insight matter in the market. In turn, this means that if we use better measures of quality they should be rewarded by the market. A diversified set of quality measures will also approach the (unknown) holistic measure.

One more point before we move to look at this in more detail. The subjective nature of quality, its relative nature within a universe, and the gradual evolution of information into the market mean that while we expect higher quality firms to command higher price, there is no reason to suspect that this will be constant over time. Quality firms can be good value as well.

## What do we study here and what do we find?

Popular commentary – often from growth style managers – strongly suggests that the pervasive aspect of the performance of growth and value styles is the quality of the stocks selected. That is, growth stocks are suggested to be higher quality (and so perform better on average) and value stocks tend to be lower quality (or “junk”), and so underperform on average.

Over two papers, we show evidence of these popular conclusions about the quality aspects of growth and value stocks are far too simplistic. This first paper looks at the relationship between value and quality in a number of ways. The second continues with the relationship between growth and quality.

This Realindex content does not constitute an offer or invitation to subscribe for any interest in the yet to be launched fund(s) and that the information presented should not be relied upon because it is incomplete and may be subject to change in future.

<sup>1</sup> With apologies to William Shakespeare (The Merchant of Venice, Act IV, Scene 1). The use of “not strained” here is an old form of “not constrained”.



Our evidence comes from three sets of tests:

- Determining proportion of stocks which are good/bad value and good/bad quality
- Assessing their underlying characteristics (growth, sentiment, uncertainty or risk)
- Comparing the return characteristics of good quality/good value stocks with those for cheap 'junk'.

Our data set is all stocks in MSCI ACWI ex Au from Jan 2000 to Sept 2022, chosen with weekly intervals.

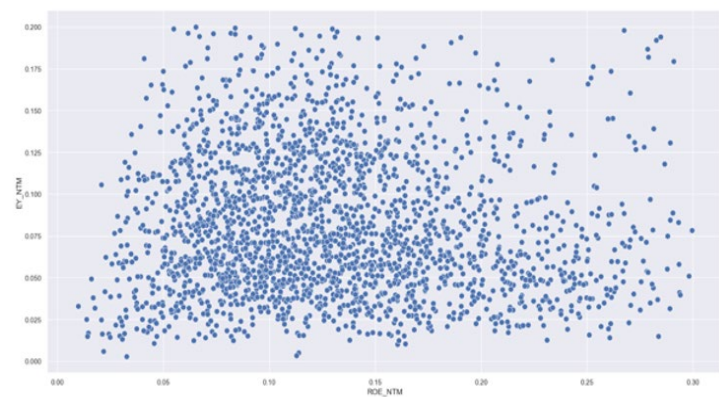
In summary, we find six key results:

- There are plenty of good value stocks that are good quality. *It is these stocks that Realindex seeks to **hold** in our value portfolios.*
- There are certainly good value stocks that are better termed "cheap for a reason", as their quality is poor. They might be termed 'junk'. *It is these stocks that Realindex seeks to **avoid** in our value portfolios.*
- The proportions of these stocks is fairly stable over time, so opportunities for the Realindex value style portfolios have always existed.
- There is a positive relationship between quality and growth – better quality names have usually had stronger earnings growth. These stocks can still be good value as well.
- The lowest quality 'cheap' names have low-growth but are also higher risk and have worse market sentiment. High quality good value names tend to have somewhat more positive sentiment as well.
- Good quality value stocks tend to outperform poor quality value (cheap for a reason) stocks through our 20 year sample, although not over the last decade as we know. Value outperforms growth overall, but recently, stocks which are expensive tend to outperform good value stocks. This is especially true if they are higher quality as well.

## Splitting value and quality

Below we construct a scatterplot of all stocks in MSCI ACWI ex Au at September 2022. The Y axis is our value measure – earnings yield using 12-month forward forecast consensus earnings divided by current price (called EY\_NTM). The X axis is our quality measure, 12-month forward forecast return on equity (or ROE\_NTM), which is forecast earnings divided by the average of the last two-years reported shareholder equity.

*Chart 1: Scatterplot of value (forecast earnings yield) against quality (forecast ROE) for MSCI ACWI ex Au at Sept 2022*



Source: Realindex, Factset

We can see a few things from this chart:

- There are few stocks which are extremely good value and also extremely good quality (top-right corner or NE quadrant)
- There are few stocks which are extremely good value which are also extremely poor quality (top-left corner or NW quadrant)
- The bulk of stocks are both good value and good quality (middle of the chart)
- Many stocks are low quality (poor ROE) but are still expensive (bottom-left corner or SW quadrant)
- High quality stocks tend to be more expensive (bottom-right corner or SE quadrant)



Chart 1 is just a snapshot taken at Sept 2022, and the key point of interest is probably that *a large proportion of stocks are neither poor value nor poor quality, and many are both good quality and good value.* Does this hold over time?

To look at the spread of companies across value and quality we assess *the proportion of stocks in each quadrant of this chart* throughout our sample.<sup>2</sup> See Chart 2 below<sup>3</sup>. We divide the universe at each point of time into the percentage of stocks which are expensive and low quality (SW quadrant, blue), expensive but good quality (SE quadrant, orange), good value but low quality (NW quadrant, green) and good value and good quality (NE quadrant, red). Apart from the GFC period – when expensive good quality stocks (orange) rotated towards cheaper good quality (red) – the proportions are quite stable. Expensive junk (blue) is usually the lowest proportion, although it has grown more recently.

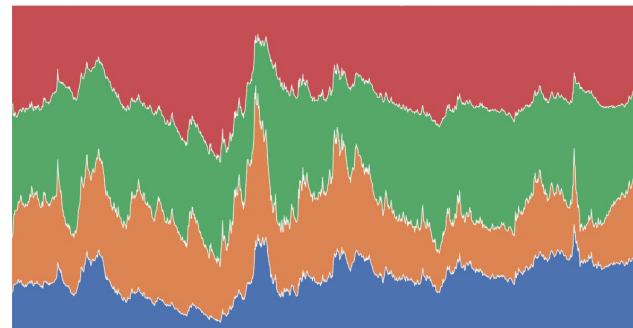
The proportions in each quadrant are:

|                                       | Chart 1 (that is, at Sept 2022) | Average (whole sample) |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| Low quality, poor value (SW, blue)    | 24.1%                           | 17.3%                  |
| High quality, poor value (SE, orange) | 26.4%                           | 22.5%                  |
| Low quality, good value (NW, green)   | 28.1%                           | 31.3%                  |
| High quality, good value (NE, red)    | 21.4%                           | 28.8%                  |

*Chart 2: Proportion of stocks in value-quality quadrants over time, Jan 2000 to Sept 2022.*

*Blue – poor value, low quality; Orange – poor value, good quality,*

*Green – good value, low quality, Red – good value, good quality.*



Source: Realindex, Factset

## There’s plenty of good quality in good value

From this we can see that there is a large proportion of good value stocks that are also good quality. However, this does not tell us the spread of good and poor quality stocks that are just among good value stocks. In other words: *what quality are good value stocks?*

For this we choose stocks which have an EY\_NTM of greater than 7.5%, and we split the quality universe up into quintiles<sup>4</sup> of ROE\_NTM; 0%-8%, 8% to 12%, and so on<sup>5</sup>. We then plot the proportions of good value stocks in each quintile over time.

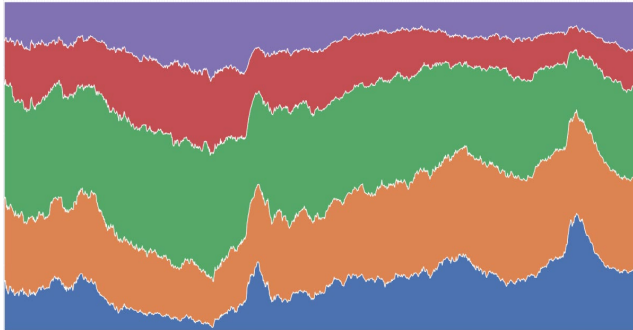
*Chart 3: Proportion of stocks of different quality quintiles among good value stocks only, Jan 2000 to Sept 2022. Worst quality quintile is blue (ROE\_NTM between 0 and 8%). Next is orange (ROE\_NTM between 8 and 12%). Then green (12 to 18%), red (18 to 24%) and finally purple, highest quality (ROE\_NTM between 24 and 30%)*

<sup>2</sup> The cut offs are: expensive (EY\_NTM < 7.5%), cheap (EY\_NTM > 7.5%), high quality (ROE\_NTM > 12.5%), low quality (ROE\_NTM < 12.5%). These are fairly arbitrary but not controversial and the results are not especially sensitive to their selection.

<sup>3</sup> Date references have been dropped on the X axis of the charts below to remove clutter from the images. Dates run from Jan 2000 to Sept 2022

<sup>4</sup> NB: Throughout this paper, we have used the term “quintile” to mean one of five divisions of the data. The “quintiles” here are not chosen to be exactly 20% of the sample, instead the aim is to choose consistent and recognisable breakpoints.

<sup>5</sup> To look at sensitivity of results, this was repeated for EY\_NTM greater than the median value at each date. The results were very similar. We also drop any outlier stocks with ROE\_NTM < 0% and > 30%, and with EY\_NTM < 0% and greater than 20%.



Source: Realindex, Factset

So, there are many stocks which are both good quality and good value over time, as we can see from [Chart 2](#). Among good value stocks, [Chart 3](#) shows that there is a wide distribution of quality as well. There is certainly a sizeable proportion of poorer quality stocks among good value (blue and orange), but it is a fallacy to claim that good value equals poor quality when such a large proportion of good value stocks exhibit good quality as well.

## Some characteristics of value and quality

A key question we must ask now: if there are many good value stocks across a range of qualities (from good to poor), what characterises them? For example, are good value and good quality stocks higher or lower risk than cheap junk? Do good quality but expensive stocks have great sentiment and low risk?

To keep this simple, we look at this through three lenses:<sup>6</sup>

- Growth: Proxied as trailing five year earnings growth (EG5Y)
- Risk: Proxied as beta and volatility (BETA and VOL)
- Sentiment: Proxied as 12 month price momentum (MOM)

<sup>6</sup> We have not shown the analysis here for brevity, but these results are not driven by region, sector or size.

The full sample average results appear in Table 1 below. It summarises the average values of growth, risk and sentiment across each quality quintile *for good value stocks only*. As noted above, lower quality names among the good value group exhibit higher risk, lower earnings growth and lower sentiment. Higher quality names are usually the opposite of this.

Table 1: Average metrics *for good value stocks only*, across quintiles of ROE\_NTM, Jan 2000 to Sept 2022.

| Quality quintile | Average trailing earnings growth | Average volatility | Average beta | Average price momentum | Average EY_NTM |
|------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|--------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Lowest (Q1)      | -2.0%                            | 38.8%              | 1.02         | -0.022                 | 11.4%          |
| Q2               | +6.1%                            | 34.5%              | 0.92         | 0.072                  | 11.5%          |
| Q3               | +12.3%                           | 34.6%              | 0.91         | 0.138                  | 11.8%          |
| Q4               | +17.5%                           | 36.5%              | 0.92         | 0.218                  | 12.0%          |
| Highest (Q5)     | +18.9%                           | 39.2%              | 0.93         | 0.315                  | 12.4%          |

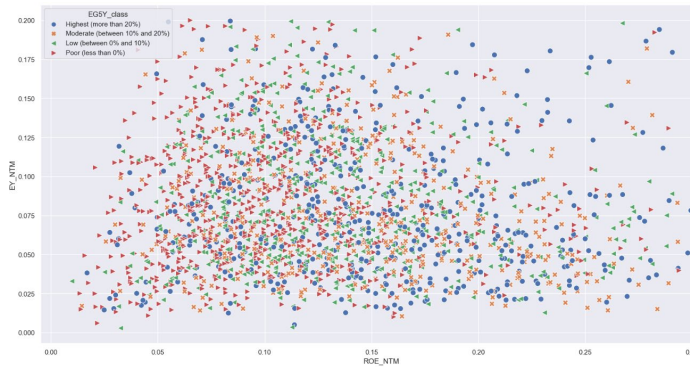
Source: Realindex, Factset

## Growth

To start, see [Chart 4](#) below. It is the scatterplot we saw earlier, but now each point is colour-coded by a trailing five-year annualised earnings growth class or grouping (blue = highest growth, greater than 20%; orange = moderate growth, between 10 and 20%; green = low growth, between 0 and 10%; and red = poor growth, less than 0%).

Chart 4: Scatterplot of Value (next 12mth earnings yield, EY\_NTM) against Quality (reported ROE\_NTM) for MSCI ACWI ex Au at Sept 2022, now colour-coded by trailing five year earnings growth (EG5Y)

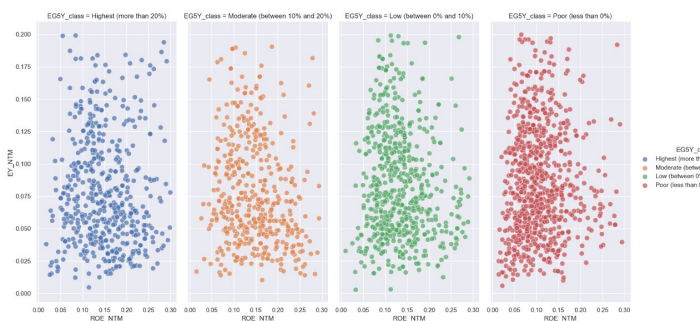




Source: Realindex, Factset

This chart gives little indication of a strong relationship between value and quality, even taking into account trailing earnings growth. We can look a little closer here by separately plotting each growth class. See [Chart 5](#) below – same colour code applies.

**Chart 5:** Separate scatterplots of Value (next 12mth earnings yield, EY\_NTMT) against Quality (reported ROE) for MSCI ACWI ex Au at Sept 2022, for each class of trailing five year earnings growth (EG5Y)



Source: Realindex, Factset

[Chart 5](#) makes [Chart 4](#) much clearer. Within each class or group of trailing growth, there is a wide spread of stocks which are good value and good quality. There is no indication that higher growth implies a shortage of good value stocks, although (as expected) the highest trailing growth firms do tend to be more expensive.

We do note, however, that lowest quality names have a lower earnings trailing growth (compare the red scatterplot with the blue, for example), and that there

<sup>7</sup> Again note, we have used the term “quintile” here to mean one of five recognisable divisions of the data, not 20% of the sample.

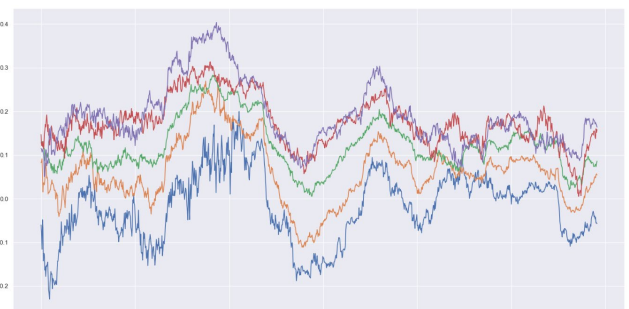
appear to be are many cheap names among these lower quality and lower growth names.

Seeing this last observation, we have to ask whether good value names with low quality indeed have low growth. As above, we now pick only good value names (EY\_NTMT > 7.5%). We then calculate the average EG5Y for each ROE\_NTMT quintile between 0 and 30%. [Chart 6](#) below shows each quintile over time.

Clearly, the worst ROE\_NTMT stocks in good value have poor trailing growth. As quality improves (blue to orange to green, etc.), the average trailing growth also improves. As these stocks are all good value, we can see that a combination of good value and good quality also corresponds to stronger trailing earnings growth.

**Chart 6:** Average trailing earnings growth for good value stocks (EY\_NTMT > 7.5%) across ROE\_NTMT quintiles<sup>7</sup>, Jan 2000 to Sept 2022.

Worst quality quintile is blue (ROE\_NTMT between 0 and 8%). Next is orange (ROE\_NTMT between 8 and 12%). Then green (12 to 18%), red (18 to 24%) and finally purple, highest quality (ROE\_NTMT between 24 and 30%)



Source: Realindex, Factset

## Risk

We look at both volatility and beta here, starting with volatility<sup>8</sup>. Although we have not included the same scatterplots as above (in the interests of brevity), we can say that:

<sup>8</sup> Measured here as 52 week total return volatility



- The cheapest names seem to be mid-range volatility, not high or low, and are perhaps somewhat lower quality.
- The most volatile names are expensive and many are lower quality as well.
- The lowest volatility names also seem to be lower quality.
- There are still many good value names which are good quality at different levels of volatility.

Do good value but poor quality stocks have greater volatility? We can assess this by looking at the following chart. In the same way as above, we now pick only good value names ( $EY\_NTM > 7.5\%$ ). We then calculate the average volatility for each ROE\_NTM quintile between 0 and 30%.

*Chart 7: Average volatility for good value stocks ( $EY\_NTM > 7.5\%$ ) across ROE\_NTM quintiles, Jan 2000 to Sept 2022. Worst quality quintile is blue (ROE\_NTM between 0 and 8%). Next is orange (ROE\_NTM between 8 and 12%). Then Green (12-18%), Red (18 to 24%) and Purple, highest quality (ROE\_NTM between 24 and 30%)*



Source: Realindex, Factset

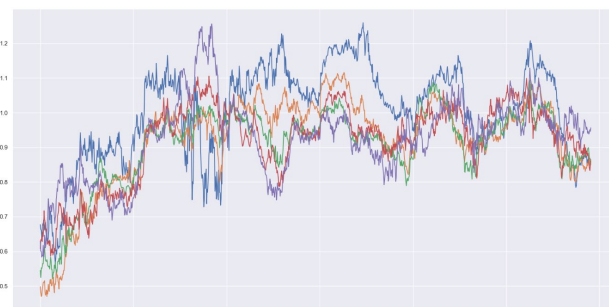
We now turn to beta, and see similar results. Again, we have excluded the scatterplots in the interests of brevity, but we can say that:

- There is some evidence of lower quality among lower beta names, and perhaps these also appear to be more expensive as well.
- If anything, there are few good value high quality stocks that are lower beta as well.

As before, [Chart 8](#) below plots average beta for each quality (ROE\_NTM) quintile for good value stocks only. This shows two interesting things:

- Lowest quality stocks (blue, quintile 1) are definitely higher beta consistently over time. The remaining stocks all have very similar beta.
- All good value stocks were quite low beta early in the sample (2000 to about 2005), but have been around an average of 1 or slightly below since then.
- Average beta was highly volatile and variable during the GFC

*Chart 8: Average beta for good value stocks ( $EY\_NTM > 7.5\%$ ) across ROE\_NTM quintiles, Jan 2000 to Sept 2022. Worst quality quintile is blue (ROE\_NTM between 0 and 8%). Next is orange (ROE\_NTM between 8 and 12%). Then Green (12-18%), Red (18 to 24%) and Purple, highest quality (ROE\_NTM between 24 and 30%)*



Source: Realindex, Factset

## Sentiment

Finally, we look at sentiment characteristics in the spread of EY\_NTM and ROE\_NTM. For this, we use our 12-month price momentum factor (MOM). Scatterplots are again excluded, however moderate to high momentum names seem somewhat skewed towards lower quality than lower momentum. In [Chart 9](#) we can see that among good value stocks there is little difference in momentum as quality changes, except perhaps that highest quality stocks tend to have



higher momentum. Sentiment seems to be more positive for higher quality good value stocks.

*Chart 9: Average momentum for good value stocks (EY\_NTM > 7.5%) across ROE\_NTM quintiles, Jan 2000 to Sept 2022.*

Worst quality quintile is blue (ROE\_NTM between 0 and 8%). Next is orange (ROE\_NTM between 8 and 12%). Then Green (12-18%), Red (18 to 24%) and Purple, highest quality (ROE\_NTM between 24 and 30%)



Source: Realindex, Factset

## Finally, returns to good value and good quality

To round out our study, we need to go back to our original split of the universe into the four quadrants of the EY\_NTM v ROE\_NTM scatterplot. At each point in time, we again divide the universe up of stocks up into four quadrants:

- NW = Good value, low quality
- NE = Good value, good quality
- SW = Poor value, low quality
- SE = Poor value, good quality

Within each quadrant, we look at the total returns preceding and following over 1, 3, 6 and 12 month periods. The idea is to assess whether the market prices in the different value and quality characteristics in the run up, and whether the market then responds positively or negatively after the classification.

We extract these snapshots at the 1, 3, 6 and 12-month sampling intervals, and calculated an equally weighted average of returns preceding and following these sample points of the same periods, so that no overlap in returns is included. Chart 13 shows the results.

*Chart 13: Equally weighted average total returns within value/quality quadrants at 1, 3, 6 and 12 months sampling, Jan 2000 to Sept 2022. Returns are non-overlapping*



Source: Realindex, Factset

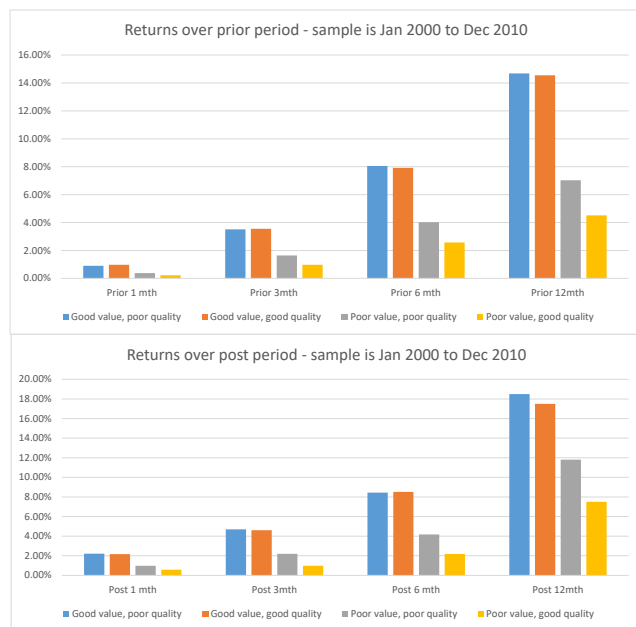
The results are quite clear:

- In the run up to each sample point, returns in more expensive quadrants (SW and SE) slightly underperform are those in good value quadrants (NW and NE). This is true at almost every prior window
- In the run up period, higher quality expensive names (SE) perform similarly to lower quality expensive names (SW)
- Once we classify a stock in each quadrant (i.e., following the event) the better value stocks outperform, with higher quality names performing slightly better.



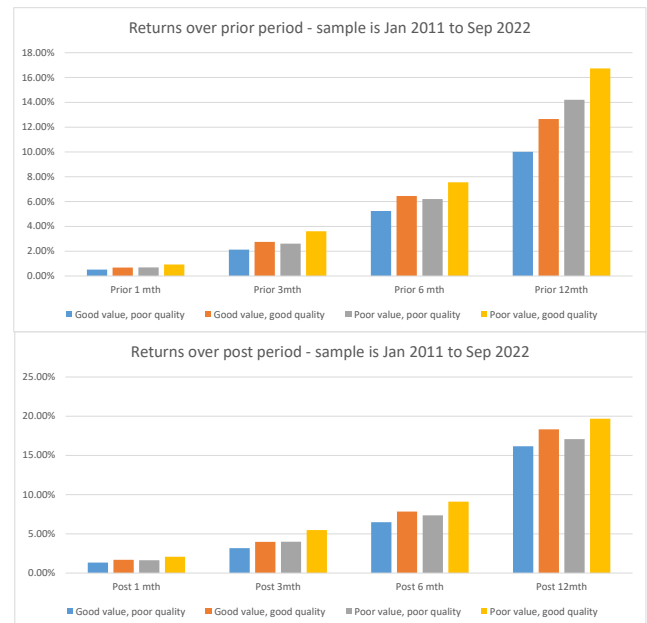
In the last decade we have seen expensive stocks perform strongly against better value stocks, but these charts do not show this. So to examine this we split the full sample roughly in two: Jan 2000 to Dec 2010, and Jan 2011 to Sept 2022. Chart 14 shows these results in Panel A and Panel B separately.

*Chart 14, Panel A: Equally weighted average total returns within value/quality quadrants at 1, 3, 6 and 12 months sampling, Jan 2000 to Dec 2010. Returns are non-overlapping*



Source: Realindex, Factset

*Chart 14, Panel B: Equally weighted average total returns within value/quality quadrants at 1, 3, 6 and 12 months sampling, Jan 2011 to Sept 2022. Returns are non-overlapping*



Source: Realindex, Factset

Now the returns to good and poor value over the last decade (when value underperformed significantly) are evident. For the first 10-years of our sample, expensive stocks (especially high quality) underperformed in the prior and post periods. This was a strong time for good value stocks. In post period of the first decade (to Dec 2010), returns to good value stocks were much stronger than for the expensive stocks.

However, from Jan 2011 to Sep 2022, expensive stocks outperformed in the prior (run up) period, but then *matched and even outperformed good value stocks in the post period*. Good quality expensive stocks were much stronger than lower quality – effectively demonstrating (as we know) that expensive stocks just became relatively *more* expensive, rather than allowing good value stocks to rebound.





## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to address misconceptions around the quality of good value and expensive stocks. Popular opinion (at least popular among some sections of the market) is that expensive names are always better growth and higher quality than good value names. We have shown here that stocks which are higher quality are also higher growth; there is no reason to suspect that these stocks are uniformly more expensive. In fact, there are many higher quality names, many with high growth, that represent good value, and there are many low quality names that are expensive.

We can summarise our results in more detail as follows:

- Many good value stocks are also good quality.  
*The Realindex investment process targets these.*
- Many good value stocks are low quality, or “junk”.  
*The Realindex investment process tries to minimise exposure to these.*
- The proportions of these stocks is fairly stable over time.
- Quality and growth are positively related – better quality names have usually had stronger earnings growth, and can also be good value.
- The lowest quality “cheap names” have low growth but are also higher risk and have worse market sentiment than better quality good value names.
- In our full sample, good value stocks tend to outperform more expensive stocks, especially for higher quality names. These expensive names have tended to outperform good value stocks more recently, as we know.

In the next (shorter) paper, we will examine the opposite side of this story – the characteristics of growth names – in the same framework we have used here.



# Wang Chun Wei, Realindex Investments

## Introduction

Individuals use language to convey meaning. Beyond the basic definitions of words and sentences, we rely on expression for the full picture of what is being said. In other words, how we say something can be just as important as what we say.

If we are confident of our knowledge and the likely response of our audience, we speak with more confidence and clarity. If we are not, we can be hesitant, long winded, confusing and perhaps negative. That is - the way we form our speech in terms of the choice of words used and the tone of them can change markedly.

This maps very directly into the communication used by senior corporate figures in their regular conference calls on earnings results. If we can extract components of their speech, we can potentially infer good or bad news about the future prospects of the firm. These calls have the added benefit of being captured as recordings and come with accurate written transcripts. It is to these transcripts that we apply our technology.

The first paper in this series looked at the physical content of the transcripts – length of speeches, use of complicated words, and so on. Here, in part two of our series, we attempt to measure the *linguistic tone* or sentiment of the speech – that is, whether words used sound positive, neutral or negative.

Over time, conference calls have become an important channel for voluntary corporate disclosure. The interaction between analysts and company management, which is in part unscripted and spontaneous, provides an opportunity for investors to extract information that may not be fully incorporated into prices.

## Linguistic tone

### What is linguistic tone?

Linguistic tone is the sentiment of the speaker extracted from the transcript of the call. Firstly, the transcript text is extracted and stop words<sup>8</sup> are removed. To assess the importance of words, we also need to know how frequently they are used – more frequently used words should be downweighted in some way as they are less significant than rarer words. Infrequent words can often be more informative.

The simplest method of estimating the linguistic tone is by calculating the percentage of positive words versus negative words after term-frequency adjustment. This so-called “bag-of-words” approach is simple yet often effective in estimating sentiment. Future work will extend on this, but most of the initial benefit of measuring tone can be achieved through this simple approach.

There has been substantial empirical research on the role of linguistic tone in asset pricing. For instance:

- Price et al. (2012) find that conference call tone was a significant predictor of abnormal returns and trading volume. They also find that the information content of conference calls is also more significant for firms that do not pay dividends (i.e. firms with higher levels of cashflow uncertainty).
- Borochin et al. (2018) find that abnormally negative conference call tones impacts firm value uncertainty.
- Furthermore, Gillam et al. (2017) find that text-based sentiment measures from the Q&A section has positive predictive power for future returns.

As discussed in part 1 of this series (on linguistic complexity and obfuscation), we believe that analysing conference calls may be better than looking at 10-Q (annual) / 10-K (quarterly) reports as they are less constrained with formality and boilerplate text. This view is shared by:

---

This Realindex content does not constitute an offer or invitation to subscribe for any interest in the yet to be launched fund(s) and that the information presented should not be relied upon because it is incomplete and may be subject to change in future.

<sup>8</sup> Stop words are words which are filtered out in the processing of text data as they are largely void of meaning, i.e. words such as determiners (eg. words like “the” and “a”).



- Brown and Tucker (2011) who show the year-on-year changes in the information content of the MD&A<sup>9</sup> section within the 10-K have been declining over time
- Bloomfield (2008) who highlights that the unscripted nature of the Q&A section allows for better examination of the information asymmetry between management and analysts.

'Off-the-cuff' tone by managers can be particularly informative, as they may reveal the underlying sentiment of the speaker. Indeed, our empirical analysis shows that for North American firms, Q&A tone is more effective than tone on management's prepared remarks in terms of predicting future returns.

Often, research on linguistic tone in conference call transcripts does not differentiate between manager and analyst remarks. We have already observed there are linguistic style differences between management-speaks versus analysts-speak. Therefore in our analysis, we differentiate between three sections: (a) manager prepared remarks, (b) analyst questions, and (c) manager responses.

## Management behaviour

With regards to management tone, managers can either engage in truthful communication or at the other extreme, opportunistically manipulate language to make firm outlook sound better than it is. The reality is likely somewhere between, but nuances of language use in these different situations leave hints that we are able to extract quantitatively.

From our previous paper, we already know that managers in under-performing firms are more likely to employ linguistic obfuscation in their speech. This could be done in a bid to delay the release of bad news, otherwise known as bad-news hoarding. However, it is not clear whether they would actively manipulate tone.

To speak in a "round-about" way (i.e., obfuscate) when earnings outlook is poor is one thing, but to actively use positive tone when the situation is negative is another thing entirely. Reputational risk should be a

major driver. Therefore, when there is bad news, we hypothesize that: *managers will make admissions, but also spend considerable time justifying the outcome.* Further, admissions like these are more likely in the *unscripted* sections than in the prepared sections of the call.

We believe managers are generally truthful when it comes to tone and sentiment. Therefore, positive (negative) tone may relate to future positive (negative) returns.

A further distinction can be made between management tones in their prepared remarks compared with their more "off the cuff" responses in the answers section. The latter is more spontaneous, and subsequently we expect the tone of the latter section to be more informative. With regards to analyst questions, we believe there is less incentive for analysts to engage in manipulative behaviour when it comes to sentiment or tone. Their tone is more likely to be transparent and to mirror their view of the firm, whether positive or negative.

## The word dictionary

In order to determine whether a word is positive or negative, we employ the Loughran-MacDonald word dictionary<sup>10</sup> which is tailored for financial text. This is a standard methodology for looking at sentiment in conference calls, and at 10-K and 10-Q reports in the academic literature.

We test a battery of different sentiment measures based on the Loughran-MacDonald word dictionary on the three distinct parts of conference call transcripts (management discussion, questions by analysts and answers by managers). Positive and negative words from this dictionary can be counted.

Tone within a section is then calculated as:

$$\text{TONE} = \frac{\text{num of positive words} - \text{num of negative words}}{\text{total words}}$$

An extension is to incorporate what are known as *term frequency inverse document frequency (TF-IDF)* weights. This scales by word frequency across

<sup>9</sup> Management Discussion and Analysis

<sup>10</sup> See for example <https://sraf.nd.edu/loughranmcdonald-master-dictionary/>



documents – less frequent words in more documents get a higher weight. We can do this by utilizing data from the Loughran-MacDonald master dictionary which provides word count and document frequency. Overall, we did not find substantial differences when using term frequencies for our long/short spread portfolios.

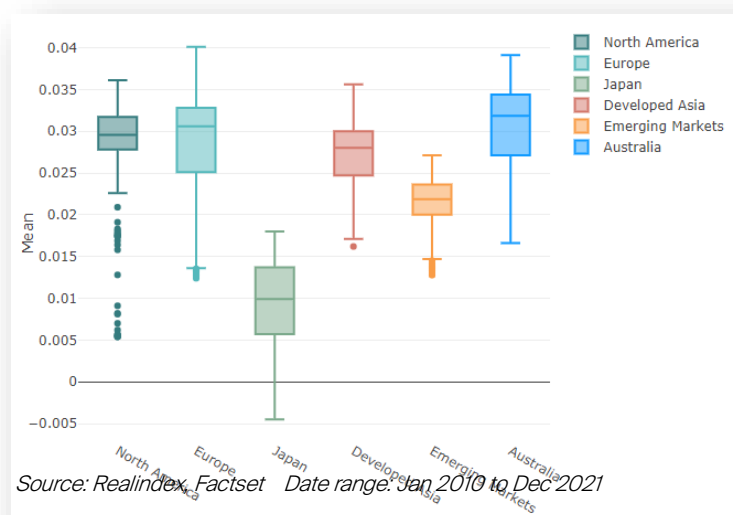
## Describing conference calls

The Factset Conference Call Transcript data covers North America, Europe and Australia. The dataset begins around 2008, however, it is only in the last 5 years that we see MSCI ACWI coverage above 80%. Overall, we have transcripts for conference calls for more than 1,400 firms covered.

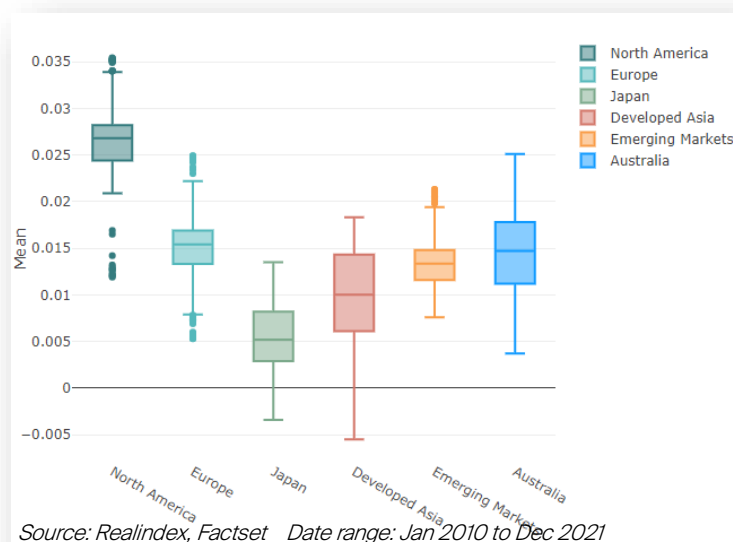
We then construct the tone measure above and in the charts below we summarise the results for the three sections (manager prepared remarks, analyst questions, and manager responses) by region. We see some noticeable differences. For example, in the Q&A sections, we note that North American tone to be more upbeat than other regions. Tone is lower in Japan in all sections. Australian tone in the Manager Prepared section is about the highest. North American management responses are relentlessly upbeat.

Chart 1. Global Sentiment

- Panel A. Management Prepared Speech Tone

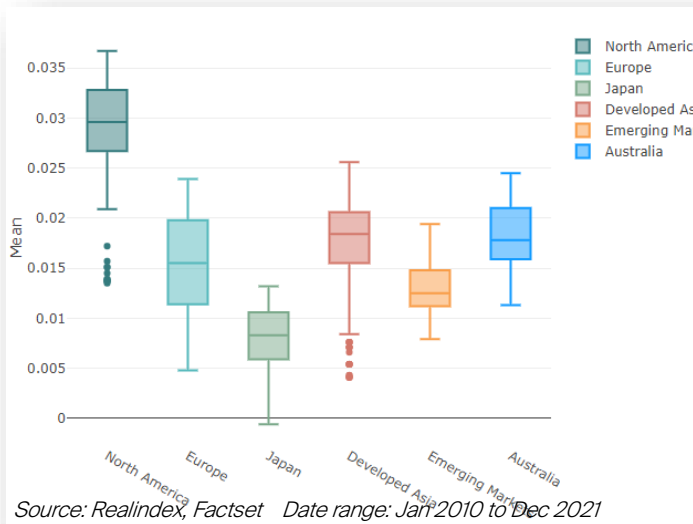


- Panel B. Analyst Question Tone





• Panel C. Management Answer Tone



## Why is this interesting? Tone as a leading indicator

If our supposition is correct, measuring the tone of conference calls in the way we have described will, we believe, give us some indication of the future of the firm, as seen by the management. If this insight is valuable, it should be reflected in firm outcomes and in future returns. That is – can conference call tone be used as an alpha signal?

### North America

In Chart 2, we plot the equally-weighted long short spread performance (that is, top quintile return less bottom quintile return) of linguistic tone in North America. Linguistic tone is broken into three distinct sections:

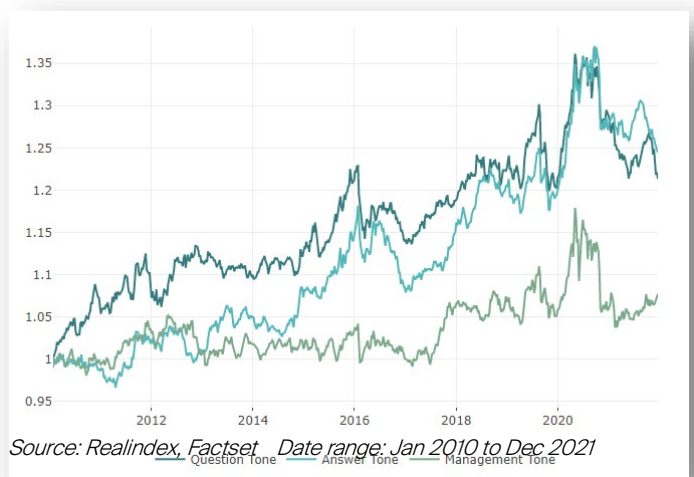
- Question Tone: linguistic tone of analyst questions
- Answer Tone: linguistic tone of senior management answers to analyst questions
- Management Tone: linguistic tone of senior management’s prepared remarks of company earnings prior to the Q&A section

We find that the performance of ‘question tone’ and ‘answer tone’ is highly correlated. We believe this makes sense, as the answers need to relate to the

topics raised by the questions. That is, in good news situations, analyst questions are likely to direct management towards discussing positive aspects of the results, and conversely when results are weak the analysts are more likely to direct their attention towards problems.

Of the three tones, management tone is based on a more scripted part of the transcript, as managers often would have prepared this beforehand. Question and answer tone should be more spontaneous, and potentially more informative. Our results suggest scripted speech gives away less information on sentiment for North American firms.

Chart 2. North American Long/Short Spread Performance



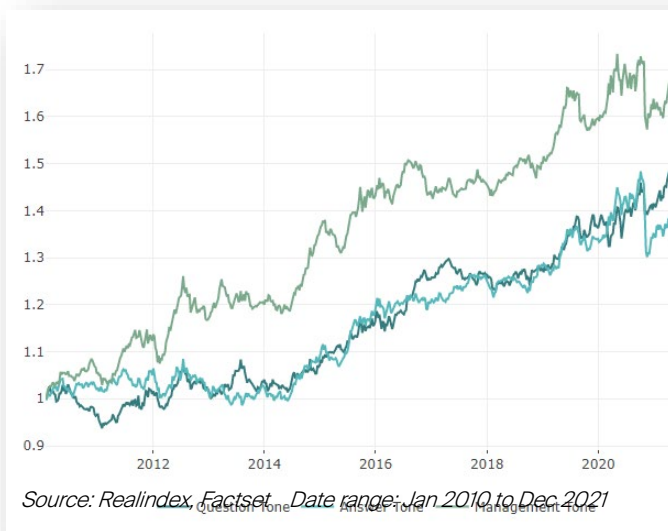
### Europe ex UK

In Chart 3 below, we repeat the plot of equally-weighted long short spread performance (quintiles) of linguistic tone, but now in Europe (ex UK). We separate UK from EU here as often firms in the former hold semi-annual conference calls whilst the latter, like the US, is quarterly frequency. We find the results in Europe to be very promising. Consistent with North America, we find that the linguistic tone of analyst questions are a good predictor of future returns. We find the spread returns of the management and answer sections to be also correlated, as they are spoken by the same group of people.





Chart 3. European Long/Short Spread Performance



### UK

In Chart 4, we broadly see a similar picture, however, given the lack of breadth in the UK, we find higher levels of volatility in spread portfolio returns.

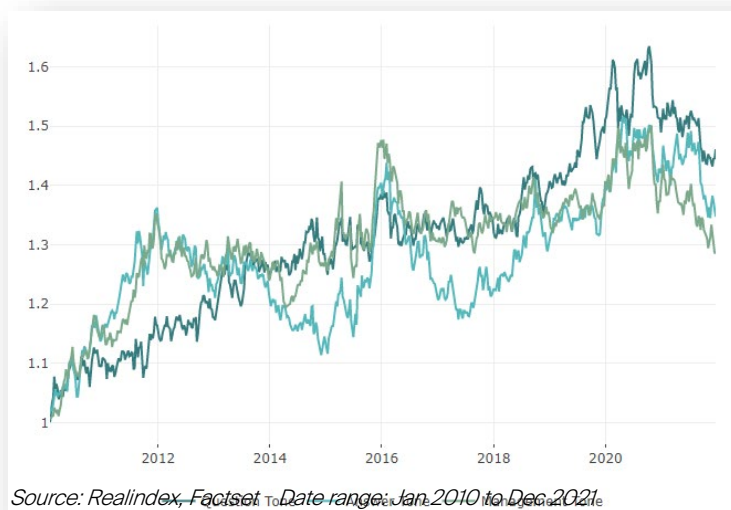
Chart 4. UK Long/Short Spread Performance



### Emerging Markets

As discussed in our first paper on this topic, the coverage of Factset transcripts in Emerging Markets is rather poor: around 30%, with about 350 names. Therefore, the results are not particularly meaningful. Regardless, we still see mildly positive results which is reassuring.

Chart 5. Emerging Markets Long/Short Spread Performance



### Statistical summary

In Table 1 below, we document the same equally-weighted spread portfolios performance statistics, along with the Fama-MacBeth panel regression T-stats after controlling for a variety of other factors: momentum, quality, value, earnings revisions and sectors. The results vary by region, and emerging market results should be largely ignored due to data scarcity. We find results in Europe to be most compelling (across all sections of the conference call), along with mildly positive results in the Q&A section of North American and UK conference calls.



**Table 1. Conference Call Tone Long/Short Spread Performance**

| Signal                       | Mean  | Stdev | IR   | Turnover | T-stat | Hit Rate | FM Mean | FM Std |
|------------------------------|-------|-------|------|----------|--------|----------|---------|--------|
| <b>North American Tone</b>   |       |       |      |          |        |          |         |        |
| Question                     | 1.63% | 4.75% | 0.34 | 245%     | 1.19   | 54.50%   | 0.003   | 1.29%  |
| Answer                       | 1.85% | 4.61% | 0.4  | 220%     | 1.39   | 51.40%   | 0.005   | 1.23%  |
| Management Prepared Remarks  | 0.62% | 4.79% | 0.13 | 198%     | 0.45   | 54.20%   | 0.001   | 1.33%  |
| <b>Europe ex UK Tone</b>     |       |       |      |          |        |          |         |        |
| Question                     | 4.33% | 5.17% | 0.84 | 250%     | 2.89   | 55.10%   | 0.004   | 1.40%  |
| Answer                       | 2.91% | 5.92% | 0.49 | 225%     | 1.7    | 55.10%   | 0.004   | 1.62%  |
| Management Prepared Remarks  | 3.96% | 5.94% | 0.67 | 199%     | 2.3    | 54.50%   | 0.007   | 1.56%  |
| <b>UK Tone</b>               |       |       |      |          |        |          |         |        |
| Question                     | 2.65% | 8.57% | 0.31 | 218%     | 1.07   | 54.70%   | 0.006   | 2.67%  |
| Answer                       | 5.73% | 9.37% | 0.61 | 192%     | 2.12   | 56.90%   | 0.017   | 2.73%  |
| Management Prepared Remarks  | 4.74% | 9.71% | 0.49 | 171%     | 1.69   | 54.20%   | 0.008   | 2.94%  |
| <b>Emerging Markets Tone</b> |       |       |      |          |        |          |         |        |
| Question                     | 3.22% | 7.36% | 0.44 | 258%     | 1.51   | 51.90%   | 0.002   | 2.38%  |
| Answer                       | 2.52% | 8.33% | 0.3  | 249%     | 1.05   | 53.20%   | 0.001   | 2.59%  |
| Management Prepared Remarks  | 2.12% | 7.96% | 0.27 | 230%     | 0.92   | 52.30%   | -0.001  | 2.49%  |

Source: Realindex, Factset Date range: Jan 2010 to Dec 2021

## LM's own sentiment measures

The Loughran-MacDonald words lists can be examined by their own internal classifications, rather than by Tone as we have defined it. These are not limited to just good ("positive") and bad ("negative") words. There are many other classifications which are interesting. These include:

- Uncertainty - 297 words incl. words such as 'may', 'approximately', 'risks', 'pending', 'uncertainty' ...
- Litigious - 905 words incl. words such as 'attorney', 'appeal', 'indemnity', 'unlawful' ...
- Strong - 19 words incl. words such as 'always', 'best', 'definitely', 'never' ...
- Weak - 27 words incl. words such as 'may', 'could', 'sometimes', 'somewhat' ...
- Constraining 184 words incl. words such as 'required', 'comply', 'committed', 'abide' ...

We repeat our study above using these categories, and we also break down Tone, as analysed above, into its positive and negative components. These signals have been sector normalized.

Overall, we do not find anything particularly meaningful in the prepared remarks section. In other words, prepared speeches in North America, do not give

away much in terms of information. Negative words by analysts seems to be the most telling, whilst positive words, uncertain words and litigious words were all very informative in the management answers section of the Q&A.

**Table 2. Other Sentiment Measures Long/Short Spread Performance (North America)**

| Signal                             | Mean   | Stdev | IR      | Turnover | T-stat | Hit Rate | FM Mean | FM Stdev | FM T-stat |
|------------------------------------|--------|-------|---------|----------|--------|----------|---------|----------|-----------|
| <b>Questions</b>                   |        |       |         |          |        |          |         |          |           |
| Positive                           | -0.15% | 4.02% | -4.00%  | 243.90%  | -0.13  | 53.00%   | -0.001  | 1.26%    | -0.32     |
| Negative                           | -2.98% | 5.28% | -56.00% | 250.30%  | -1.95  | 45.00%   | -0.007  | 1.30%    | -1.89     |
| Uncertainty                        | -0.07% | 3.58% | -2.00%  | 257.60%  | -0.07  | 48.10%   | 0.003   | 1.10%    | 1.07      |
| Litigious                          | -1.22% | 4.56% | -27.00% | 285.60%  | -0.93  | 45.80%   | -0.002  | 1.26%    | -0.47     |
| Strong                             | 1.05%  | 4.76% | 22.00%  | 382.90%  | 0.76   | 49.00%   | -0.004  | 1.04%    | -1.43     |
| Weak                               | -0.26% | 3.42% | -8.00%  | 250.10%  | -0.27  | 51.90%   | 0.002   | 1.10%    | 0.58      |
| Constraining                       | 2.34%  | 5.04% | 46.00%  | 368.90%  | 1.6    | 53.20%   | 0.003   | 1.26%    | 0.92      |
| <b>Answers</b>                     |        |       |         |          |        |          |         |          |           |
| Positive                           | 1.72%  | 3.83% | 45.00%  | 221.10%  | 1.56   | 50.80%   | 0.005   | 1.12%    | 1.71      |
| Negative                           | -1.54% | 5.17% | -30.00% | 229.00%  | -1.03  | 46.90%   | -0.001  | 1.35%    | -0.33     |
| Uncertainty                        | -1.37% | 4.15% | -33.00% | 230.40%  | -1.14  | 46.50%   | -0.005  | 1.42%    | -1.26     |
| Litigious                          | -1.41% | 4.17% | -34.00% | 283.40%  | -1.17  | 47.60%   | -0.006  | 1.36%    | -1.47     |
| Strong                             | -1.27% | 3.81% | -33.00% | 255.50%  | -1.15  | 50.60%   | 0       | 1.02%    | -0.06     |
| Weak                               | -0.17% | 3.49% | -5.00%  | 240.30%  | -0.16  | 49.50%   | -0.003  | 1.13%    | -0.93     |
| Constraining                       | 0.64%  | 3.92% | 16.00%  | 253.00%  | 0.36   | 49.80%   | 0.002   | 1.24%    | 0.58      |
| <b>Management Prepared Remarks</b> |        |       |         |          |        |          |         |          |           |
| Positive                           | 0.09%  | 4.19% | 0.02    | 188.10%  | 0.07   | 52.60%   | 0       | 1.21%    | 0.06      |
| Negative                           | -1.63% | 6.07% | -0.27   | 201.00%  | -0.93  | 43.70%   | -0.003  | 1.51%    | -0.73     |
| Uncertainty                        | -0.44% | 3.37% | -0.13   | 184.40%  | -0.46  | 50.00%   | -0.003  | 1.12%    | -1.02     |
| Litigious                          | -1.10% | 3.77% | -0.29   | 215.80%  | -1.01  | 50.60%   | -0.001  | 1.31%    | -0.24     |
| Strong                             | -2.07% | 5.28% | -0.39   | 365.70%  | -1.35  | 46.30%   | -0.004  | 0.98%    | -1.25     |
| Weak                               | 0.44%  | 3.78% | 0.12    | 280.60%  | 0.4    | 51.90%   | 0.002   | 0.99%    | 0.73      |
| Constraining                       | -0.35% | 4.15% | -0.23   | 219.10%  | -0.19  | 41.90%   | -0.002  | 1.22%    | -0.61     |

Source: Realindex, Factset Date range: Jan 2010 to Dec 2021

In Europe the prepared management discussion section is more straightforward. For instance, positive tone is associated with strong positive T-stat. Similarly, litigious and constraining words is associated with future negative returns. Consistent with North America, negative sentiment by analyst is the strong indicator, whilst positive and litigious words by management responses were also significant.



**Table 3. Other Sentiment Measures Long/Short Spread Performance (Europe)**

| Signal                             | Mean   | Stdev | IR    | Turnover | T-stat | Hit Rate | FM Mean | FM Stdev | FM    |
|------------------------------------|--------|-------|-------|----------|--------|----------|---------|----------|-------|
| <b>Questions</b>                   |        |       |       |          |        |          |         |          |       |
| Positive                           | 2.85%  | 4.44% | 0.64  | 243.50%  | 2.22   | 56.10%   | 0.002   | 1.39%    | 0.45  |
| Negative                           | -3.69% | 5.59% | -0.66 | 247.30%  | -2.28  | 46.60%   | -0.005  | 1.35%    | -1.32 |
| Uncertainty                        | -0.84% | 5.06% | -0.17 | 248.00%  | -0.57  | 49.80%   | 0       | 1.50%    | -0.06 |
| Litigious                          | -1.19% | 5.31% | -0.22 | 312.20%  | -0.77  | 47.80%   | -0.006  | 1.70%    | -1.17 |
| Strong                             | 0.55%  | 5.10% | 0.11  | 374.30%  | 0.37   | 51.40%   | -0.002  | 1.38%    | -0.37 |
| Weak                               | 0.32%  | 4.52% | 0.07  | 239.50%  | 0.25   | 50.80%   | -0.003  | 1.38%    | -0.63 |
| Constraining                       | 1.63%  | 4.95% | 0.33  | 362.30%  | 1.14   | 50.20%   | 0.006   | 1.48%    | 1.49  |
| <b>Answers</b>                     |        |       |       |          |        |          |         |          |       |
| Positive                           | 2.14%  | 5.42% | 0.4   | 222.60%  | 1.37   | 54.30%   | 0.004   | 1.63%    | 0.87  |
| Negative                           | -1.99% | 5.92% | -0.34 | 225.90%  | -1.16  | 48.20%   | -0.002  | 1.50%    | -0.35 |
| Uncertainty                        | 0.83%  | 4.41% | 0.19  | 235.70%  | 0.65   | 50.60%   | 0.004   | 1.52%    | 0.81  |
| Litigious                          | -3.71% | 5.07% | -0.73 | 238.70%  | -2.53  | 44.20%   | -0.012  | 1.67%    | -2.46 |
| Strong                             | -0.62% | 4.29% | -0.14 | 238.10%  | -0.5   | 50.00%   | -0.002  | 1.33%    | -0.6  |
| Weak                               | 0.36%  | 4.77% | 0.08  | 234.40%  | 0.26   | 50.80%   | 0.004   | 1.45%    | 0.88  |
| Constraining                       | -1.35% | 4.58% | -0.29 | 249.30%  | -1.02  | 45.50%   | -0.002  | 1.48%    | -0.38 |
| <b>Management Prepared Remarks</b> |        |       |       |          |        |          |         |          |       |
| Positive                           | 5.04%  | 5.56% | 0.91  | 192.30%  | 3.14   | 55.80%   | 0.009   | 1.56%    | 1.99  |
| Negative                           | -2.96% | 6.39% | -0.46 | 199.90%  | -1.6   | 43.40%   | 0       | 1.56%    | -0.05 |
| Uncertainty                        | -0.87% | 5.07% | -0.17 | 214.40%  | -0.59  | 47.60%   | -0.002  | 1.69%    | -0.46 |
| Litigious                          | -2.77% | 5.47% | -0.51 | 231.50%  | -1.75  | 47.90%   | -0.011  | 1.75%    | -2.11 |
| Strong                             | -0.33% | 4.05% | -0.08 | 269.80%  | -0.28  | 48.90%   | 0       | 1.26%    | -0.06 |
| Weak                               | 1.53%  | 5.13% | 0.29  | 233.00%  | 1.02   | 48.90%   | 0.004   | 1.53%    | 0.02  |
| Constraining                       | -4.18% | 5.81% | -0.72 | 233.00%  | -2.49  | 43.60%   | -0.01   | 1.56%    | -2.14 |

Source: Realindex, Factset Date range: Jan 2010 to Dec 2021

Overall, we find these other sentiment measures tagged by the Loughran-MacDonald master dictionary to be too noisy to be implemented as straightforward signals. Instead our preference is for the original tone metric described earlier.

We do however find some interesting asymmetric characteristics. For example, negative words by analysts are more meaningful than positive words, i.e., we should be more aware of analyst concerns than analyst praises. Conversely, positive tone by managers in response to analysts is a more potent signal than negative tone.

## Conclusions

This paper describes how conference call tone can be used as an alpha signal. These signals are robust, easy to calculate and have good intuitive sense. Capturing the speech via textual analysis – both in

content and in tone – gives us insight into the strength of conviction or uncertainty of management and analyst community regarding the future prospects of the firm.

In particular we find that:

- Whilst managers may obfuscate (as discussed in our previous paper), they are generally truthful when it comes to sentiment. This means positive (negative) tone relates to future positive (negative) returns.
- In North America, tone works best in the unscripted Q&A section. And in particular, negative tone by analysts is a strong signal.
- Tone is particularly strong in Europe, and also works in the management discussion section

One last point: application of these ideas – and extensions on them – to Realindex’ investment process is both additive and diversifying.

## Reference

Bloomfield (2008) Discussion of annual report readability, current earnings, and earnings persistence. *Journal of Accounting and Economics*, 45, 248-252.

Borochin, P. Cicon, J, DeLisle, J. and S. Price (2016) The Effects of Conference Call Tones on Market Perceptions of Value Uncertainty, *Journal of Financial Markets*

Brown and Tucker (2011) Large-Sample Evidence on Firms’ Year-over-Year MD&A Modifications, *Journal of Accounting Research*, Vol 49 (2), 309 - 346

Gillam, R., Guerard, J. and R. Cahan (2017) Getting Sentimental: Conference Call Sentiment and Stock Returns, *McKinley Capital*

Li, F. (2006) Do Stock Market Investors Understand the Risk Sentiment of Corporate Annual Reports?, SSRN, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=898181>

Price, S. Peterson D. and B. Bliss (2012) Earnings conference calls and stock returns: The incremental informativeness of textual tone, *Journal of Banking and Finance*, Vol 36 (4), 992-1011



## Important Information

This material is for general information purposes only. It does not constitute investment or financial advice and does not take into account any specific investment objectives, financial situation or needs. This is not an offer to provide asset management services, is not a recommendation or an offer or solicitation to buy, hold or sell any security or to execute any agreement for portfolio management or investment advisory services and this material has not been prepared in connection with any such offer. Before making any investment decision you should consider, with the assistance of a financial advisor, your individual investment needs, objectives and financial situation. We have taken reasonable care to ensure that this material is accurate, current, and complete and fit for its intended purpose and audience as at the date of publication. No assurance is given or liability accepted regarding the accuracy, validity or completeness of this material and we do not undertake to update it in future if circumstances change. To the extent this material contains any expression of opinion or forward-looking statements, such opinions and statements are based on assumptions, matters and sources believed to be true and reliable at the time of publication only. This material reflects the views of the individual writers only. Those views may change, may not prove to be valid and may not reflect the views of everyone at First Sentier Investors.

## About First Sentier Investors

References to 'we', 'us' or 'our' are references to First Sentier Investors, a global asset management business which is ultimately owned by Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group. Certain of our investment teams operate under the trading names FSSA Investment Managers, Stewart Investors and Realindex Investments, all of which are part of the First Sentier Investors group. We communicate and conduct business through different legal entities in different locations. This material is communicated in:

- **European Economic Area** by First Sentier Investors (Ireland) Limited, authorised and regulated in Ireland by the Central Bank of Ireland (CBI reg no. C182306; reg office 70 Sir John Rogerson's Quay, Dublin 2, Ireland; reg company no. 629188)
- **United Kingdom** by First Sentier Investors (UK) Funds Limited, authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (reg. no. 2294743; reg office Finsbury Circus House, 15 Finsbury Circus, London EC2M 7EB)
- **Other jurisdictions**, where this document may lawfully be issued, by First Sentier Investors International IM Limited, authorised and regulated in the UK by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA ref no. 122512; Registered office: 23 St. Andrew Square, Edinburgh, EH2 1BB; Company no. SC079063).

To the extent permitted by law, MUFG and its subsidiaries are not liable for any loss or damage as a result of reliance on any statement or information contained in this document. Neither MUFG nor any of its subsidiaries guarantee the performance of any investment products referred to in this document or the repayment of capital. Any investments referred to are not deposits or other liabilities of MUFG or its subsidiaries, and are subject to investment risk, including loss of income and capital invested. © First Sentier Investors Group