

Screen your finance planner

THE PROBLEM: I'm a recently divorced senior. My ex-husband handled all the finances. I have gone to many financial seminars and everyone wants my business, but I don't know enough about protecting myself. How do I verify the credentials, honesty and ability of financial advisers I am considering hiring?

THE EXPERT: Cary Carbonaro, certified financial planner, president, Family Financial Research, Huntington.

THE STRATEGY: Government financial officials and consumer advocates warn about "free lunch" seminars staged by salespersons more interested in pushing a product than on thoroughly analyzing your financial needs. You are smart to investigate the backgrounds and motivation of those who want to manage your money. Get several personal referrals for any planners you consider, then ask for a courtesy meeting to discuss their services.

HOW IT WORKS: Many individuals are in the business of giving financial advice, including brokers, certified financial planners and insurance agents.

Certified financial planners must pass an exam and demonstrate advanced education and experience. Some sell commission-based prod-

ucts and others offer fee-based services. Check them out at brokercheck.finra.org. The CFP code of ethics is at cfp.net; you can check individuals' standing (including disciplinary actions) at cfp.net/search.

Some CFPs are "fee-only" planners. They are not brokers selling products, so you must pay them for advice about your finances. Find them through the Web site of the National Association of Personal Financial Advisors, napfa.org. Fee-only planners take a fiduciary oath. focusonfiduciary.com/fiduciary_napfa.htm

Insurance brokers also can give planning advice. They sell insurance products and are regulated by the state of New York. Information about insurance companies, brokers and policies is at ins.state.ny.us/consindx.htm.

THE RESULTS: Any planner who works on commission should disclose that to you up front. If you're not sure, ask how they get paid. If they're commission-based, ask if they are objective enough to put your best interests ahead of making a sale. If you're not convinced and can pay up front, choose a fee-only financial planner.

— KAREN E. KLEIN

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