Oberweis Asset Management

MICRO-CAP GROWTH MARKET COMMENTARY

1Q 2024

The Quarter in Review

The Oberweis Micro-Cap Growth Composite returned 3.90% (3.66% net of fees) in the first quarter of 2024 versus 6.60% for the Russell Microcap Growth Index, lagging the benchmark by 270 basis points (294 basis points net of fees).

Macro performance factors were generally mixed for our strategy to start the year. On the positive side, the top three ROE quintiles in the Russell 2000 Growth Index outperformed the lowest two quintiles, and profitable companies outperformed non-earners. However, within the small-cap and micro-cap universe, performance of the smallest companies lagged; the bottom market cap quintile of companies in the Russell 2000 Growth Index lagged the top quintile in the quarter by nearly 1,000 basis points (1.87% versus 11.67%). More broadly, large-cap stocks continued their dominance over small-cap stocks, while growth outperformed value.

The economy continues to pleasantly surprise and is now projected to grow 2.8% in the first quarter[1]. The consumer, which accounts for nearly 68% of economic output, is healthy, employed, and still spending. Their debt-service ratio remains well below average and they still sit on roughly $800 billion of excess savings accumulated during Covid. The federal government's post-Covid stimulus is also bolstering economic growth, and our conversations with companies benefiting suggest this trend should continue well into 2025.

Despite the economic strength, market pundits hoping and praying for rate cuts remained on vigilant "Fed alert" during the quarter, reacting to every wiggle and waggle in economic data and inflation readings. Last quarter, we scoffed at the notion the Fed would cut interest rates in earnest in 2024, noting the six rate cuts projected by Fed Funds futures at year-end seemed "optimistic to us." Sure enough, the U.S. Treasury 10-Year yield bounced back to 4.2%, and the "consensus" view calling for numerous rate cuts appears to be misguided. Looking forward, composite Purchasing Managers' Index readings suggest stable economic activity in the U.S., Japan, and the U.K. While China remains weak, conditions in India and Brazil are robust. All of this, combined with recently rising oil prices, might keep inflation stubbornly above the Fed's 2% target in the short-term, and bolster the "higher-for-longer" rate view.

Speaking of consensus views that may ultimately be incorrect: the sentiment toward micro-cap and small-cap stocks is as pervasively negative as we've observed in our careers. Large caps are red hot and over-loved, with the top 10 stocks in the S&P 500 reaching a record 34% of the index at the end of March. What could go wrong? In recent commentaries we have highlighted that the valuation discount for small-caps (of which micro-cap is a subset) versus large-caps is the most attractive since the late 1990's, and small-caps now represent only 4% of total U.S. equity market capitalization, the lowest level in nearly 100 years. The majority of clients and prospects we speak with are broadly underweight small-caps relative to their stated asset allocations, and some have abandoned the asset class altogether. Investor interest in micro-caps, where we believe research adds value and can lead to alpha generation, is also abnormally low in our view. From a contrarian standpoint, we reiterate our belief that micro-caps and small-caps will materially outperform large-caps over the next 5 to 10 years and the current environment represents the most compelling micro-cap investment opportunity on a relative basis we've ever seen.

[1] According to projections by the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta.

AVERAGE ANNUAL TOTAL RETURNS ***(as of March 31, 2024)***

	QTD	1 Yr	3 Yr	5 Yr	10 Yr	Since Inception 1/1/1996
Micro-Cap Growth (gross of fees)	**3.90%**	**14.35%**	**11.64%**	**18.68%**	**15.15%**	**13.19%**
Micro-Cap Growth (net of fees)	**3.66%**	**13.39%**	**10.67%**	**17.68%**	**14.13%**	**12.15%**
Russell Microcap Growth Index	6.60%	15.43%	-10.99%	4.19%	3.84%	N/A

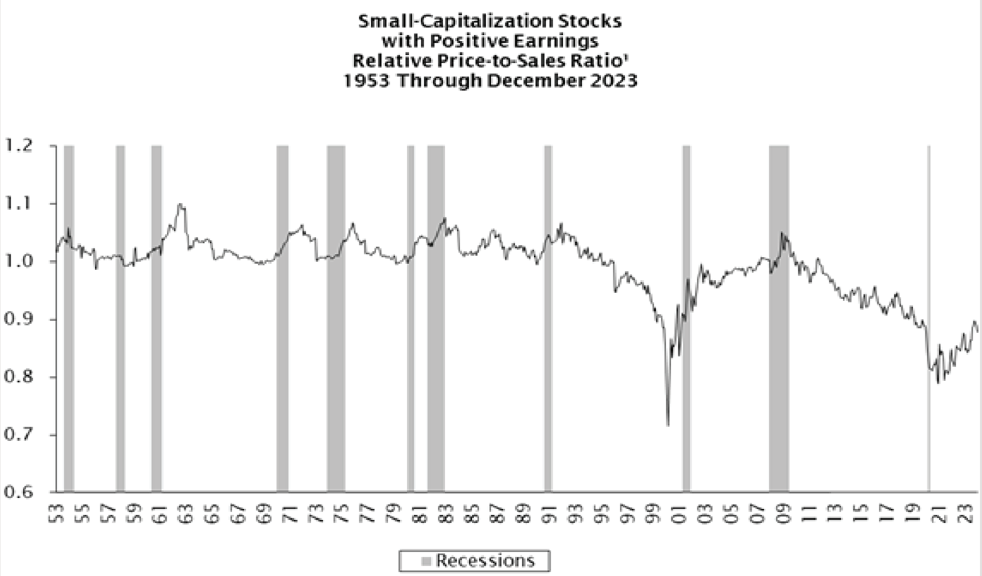
Past performance is not necessarily indicative of future results. Performance is historical and includes the reinvestment of dividends and other income. Unusually high returns may not be sustainable. The strategy invests in rapidly growing smaller and medium-sized companies that may offer greater return potential. However, these investments often involve greater risks and volatility. Foreign investments involve greater risks than U.S. investments, including political and economic risks and the risk of currency fluctuations. Net-of-fee composite returns are calculated using the highest model investment advisory fees applicable to portfolios within the composite. Advisory fees are disclosed in Part II of Form ADV.

Oberweis Asset Management, Inc. ("OAM") is an independent investment management firm that is not affiliated with any parent organization. The composite returns are comprised of all fully discretionary accounts with a minimum value of $5 million. Performance results, from 1-1-96 until 12-31-03 and 9-1-11 to present were derived solely from the performance of the Oberweis Micro-Cap Fund, a registered, open-end mutual fund, for which OAM serves as investment adviser. Prior to November 4, 2001, James D. Oberweis was the sole portfolio manager for the Micro-Cap Fund during the period of the performance results noted. Accounts are dollar-weighted within the composite and reported in U.S. dollars.

The Russell Microcap Growth Index measures the performance of those Russell Micro Cap companies with higher price-to-book ratios and higher forecasted growth values. The performance data includes reinvested dividends. The Russell Microcap Index is represented by the smallest 1,000 securities in the small cap Russell 2000 Index plus the next 1,000 securities. Each index is an unmanaged group of stocks, whose performance does not reflect the deduction of fees, expenses or taxes. It is not possible to invest directly in an index.

The Quarter in Review (continued)

Importantly, however, not all micro-cap and small-cap stocks are created equal. Non-earners represent over 40% of the Russell 2000 Index , so there's a lot of "junk" in the space. Interestingly, those non-earners – buoyed by over a decade of abnormally easy monetary policy – are trading near-record-high valuations. When the discount rate is near zero and money is free, valuations don't matter much and it's more difficult for companies to be valued on their specific fundamentals.



Source: Empirical Research Partners Analysis.
¹ Capitalization-weighted data, relative to all small-cap stocks.

Conversely, small-cap stocks with earnings, as seen in the chart above from Empirical Research Partners, trade near a record valuation discount to the entire small-cap universe. Under our investment philosophy that targets micro-cap companies generating a significant positive earnings surprise, our portfolio is consistently overweight companies with earnings and companies with higher returns-on-equity. We believe our typical investments will fare significantly better in a more normalized interest rate environment where there's a cost of capital, and the valuation discount shown above will mean-revert over time and provide a significant tailwind to our portfolio going forward. We think the way to fully exploit the dislocation in micro-caps is with a focus on quality.

In the short run, we wouldn't be surprised to see increased volatility in the equity market, particularly as the presidential election takes center stage this summer and autumn. The market hates uncertainty, and our view is this election has an above-average potential for disruption. If things get a little rocky, periods of heightened fear usually represent compelling long-term entry points to invest in this strategy. While sentiment and equity prices may oscillate wildly in the short-run in response to the latest headlines – economic or political – our investment approach instead focuses on companies generating better-than-expected earnings power driven by misunderstood fundamental change. The P/E multiple investors are willing to pay for these companies may vary from quarter to quarter, but we believe a diversified portfolio of these investments is likely to yield enhanced returns over the long term.

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Portfolio Highlights

As of March 31, 2024, the portfolio was 97.2% invested in 83 different positions. The portfolio had its largest over-weightings in industrials (24.7% average weighting during the quarter versus 14.3% for the Russell Microcap Growth Index), technology (26.0% versus 16.1%), and consumer discretionary (12.0% versus 10.2%). The portfolio was most underweight health care (21.2% versus 38.3%), consumer staples (0.6% versus 2.6%) and communication services (0.9% versus 2.7%).

Performance in the first quarter was positively impacted by stock selection in financials (where our holdings returned 9.15% versus -1.36% for the benchmark's financials holdings), energy (9.16% versus -5.27%), and industrials (12.02% versus 10.16%). Our stock selections in technology (-4.79% versus 2.55%) and healthcare (2.55% versus 10.11%) detracted from performance.

Organization Update

There was no change to the team during the quarter.

Oberweis Asset Management's Investment Philosophy

We believe that investing in smaller companies driving revenue and earnings growth in excess of expectations results in superior investment performance over long periods of time. We believe that innovation is the key to economic growth and wealth creation and are committed to investing in companies at the forefront of innovation – smaller company stocks that offer the potential for extraordinary revenue and earnings growth.

The entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well at these companies. Many are nimble and uniquely address the needs of their customers with patented new products and services. Successful investing, however, demands more than finding companies with good growth prospects. We must also buy these stocks for our clients at prices that make sense. By paying careful attention to companies' valuations in relation to expected earnings growth rates, we seek to purchase stocks when they still have considerable appreciation potential.

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