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STOCKS

Using Beta

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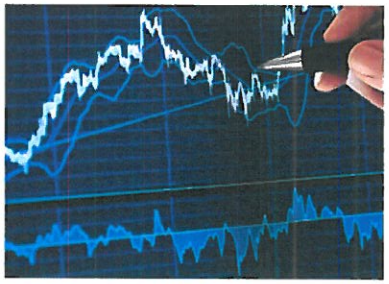

In finance, the Beta of a security (or portfolio) is used as an indicator of its historical volatility in regards to a benchmark, generally the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) Composite Index or the S&P 500 Index. At Value Line, we derive the Beta coefficient from a regression analysis of the relationship between weekly percentage changes in the price of a stock and weekly percentage changes in the NYSE Composite Index over a period of five years. In the case of shorter price histories, a shorter time period is used, but two years is the minimum. Value Line then adjusts these Betas to account for their long-term tendency to converge toward 1.00. (Though the scope of this convergence is beyond our purposes here, readers can refer to M. Blume, "On the Assessment of Risk," Journal of Finance, March 1971 for further details.)

Now that we have our Beta number, what does it mean? If an equity mirrors the benchmark, then it carries a Beta of 1.00. If Stock X has a Beta of 2.00, it is expected to rise (or fall) twice as much as the movement of the benchmark. For example, if the NYSE Composite Index rises (falls) 10%, Stock X will likely rise (fall) 20%. (For a more detailed overview, see Understanding Beta). Beta can also be negative (infrequent but possible), which would mean that the equity's return tends to move in the opposite direction from the market's move. Moreover, there is no upper or lower bound to Beta, although it typically does not stray too far from 1.00. Finally, a Beta of zero does not mean the asset is risk-free, just that the correlation of that asset's return to the market's return is zero.

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