

A Focus on Values

By emphasizing clients' values, **Jeff Williams** has built a firm with \$100 million in assets in four years' time



Jeff Williams has seen rapid growth through his values-based process.



Jeff Williams, owner of Grand Rapids, Michigan-based Grand Wealth Management, is dedicated

to solving the needs of high-net-worth individuals and families in the West Michigan area. That dedication, combined with a values-driven

wealth management approach to serving clients and managing assets, has helped him build a \$100 million firm over the past four years.

His diverse client base has an average portfolio size of more than \$2 million and includes business owners, senior executives, professionals and retirees. Some are family stewards managing family assets and some seek to maintain their personal wealth, while others are responsible for managing funds on behalf of pension and profit-sharing plans. Regardless of who they are, however, they all face complex issues requiring coordinated solutions that work in concert with each other.

That's where wealth management adds real value. Williams recognizes the importance of integrating all the key areas of financial planning—investment management, retirement planning, estate and charitable planning, insurance, and income tax planning—as all these areas are integral to achieving personal financial success, especially for

affluent investors. “We have positioned ourselves as wealth managers, supporting a broad range of clients who need a comprehensive approach to financial services,” says Williams. “We can act as our clients’ chief financial officer, handling every kind of economic and financial issue with a network of legal and investment professionals.”

Williams focuses much of his effort on making sure that his clients’ wealth plans are closely linked to their most important goals and values—a key component of wealth management that differentiates it from other approaches. “We spend a good deal of time making sure we are supporting clients’ biggest priorities in life,” says Williams. “If the portfolio is not being used to further the individual’s quality of life and pursue what he or she is passionate about, then the money is not being properly employed.”

Williams says the firm’s values-based approach is so compelling that clients have largely taken the recent

downturn in stride. “Almost every time we meet with our clients, they tell us that we’ve prepared them well for these sorts of downturns—even an unusual one such as this,” he says. “And then they ask with real concern about how we’re handling our own challenges.”

Many of the firm’s clients are entrepreneurs, a group with which Williams is especially comfortable. Entrepreneurs, he says, understand the ups and downs of financial markets and are more comfortable with a wider range of returns than are many other investors. Additionally, his father ran a travel agency. His mother, a teacher, instilled the value of learning and sharing knowledge—a value that Williams makes sure to pass on to clients. “I didn’t set out to be in this field, but I ended up in an industry that includes both teaching and private enterprise,” he says. “Both of those backgrounds play an important role in how we operate as wealth managers.”

Prior to founding Grand Wealth Management in 2004, Williams was a principal with the international financial services firm Ernst & Young, where he served as director of personal financial counseling services for the West Michigan practice and director of investment advisory services for the Lake Michigan area (including the Chicago market). In this capacity, Williams supervised more than \$475 million in investments.

In addition to his extensive professional experience, Williams holds designations including CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER® professional, Certified Investment Management Analyst® and Accredited Investment Fiduciary®. He is also a certified public accountant and has a

Personal Financial Specialist credential. He earned a bachelor’s degree in accounting from Michigan State University and a master’s degree in taxation from Grand Valley State University. He completed his CIMA coursework through the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and his AIF coursework through the Center for Fiduciary Studies at the University of Pittsburgh.

Grand Wealth Management is both independent and fee-only. The firm’s investment philosophy is firmly rooted in the conviction that markets are efficient—meaning that current prices reflect the knowledge and expectations of all investors. The most important decision an investor can make, says Williams, is the appropriate balance of stocks, bonds and cash, not the particular stocks you choose or the timing of your investment decisions. He favors broad diversification that follows the tenets of Modern Portfolio Theory and implements his strategy using asset-class investment solutions from leading firms such as Dimensional Fund Advisors (which he started working with soon after going out on his own).

He also has benefited from CEG Worldwide’s wealth management coaching efforts, which have enabled him to stay abreast of today’s most effective methods for building great relationships, serving clients and growing his firm. “CEG Worldwide is a leading wealth coach at the front of the industry,” he says. “Their approach is based around industry-wide research and the results are grounded in real-world analysis. We continue to work with them because their insights have proven most fruitful in helping us build our business.”

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