

# Investment Strategies When Selecting Sustainable Firms

**Todd M. Shank, University of South Florida St. Petersburg  
Benjamin Shockey, Raymond James Financial**

*“Sustainability” is the most recent construct to describe the efforts by today’s corporations to include environmental, social, and economic governance considerations in their daily business operations. Such non-financial areas of firm performance have received increased focus, especially over recent years as some firms have sought to differentiate themselves from competitors in these areas. Of central concern to analysts and investors is whether an emerging emphasis on these facets of sustainability are financially rewarded by market participants. Prior research of this question has generally supported the idea that firms with notably better attention to sustainable business practices do outperform their peers financially, likely due to perceived lower future risk. Our study seeks to examine the types of investment approaches to selecting sustainable firms for inclusion in an equity portfolio in order to determine the efficacy of the traditional passive versus active investment strategies. We use two groups of firms, both judged by analysts as “sustainability-focused firms”, although their reported level of commitment was not the same. We find support for an active selection of sustainable firms on a risk-adjusted basis over the past decade using two different firm groupings of the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI). The evidence presented here supports analysts’ efforts’ to identify global companies that are sustainability leaders in their industries, since they were found to have significantly better financial performance over the past decade compared to firms merely identified as being “sustainable firms” in the broader markets.*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, numerous top researchers within the financial industry have attempted to establish a link between a firm’s financial performance and their proclivity to embrace sustainable business practices. In doing so, these top researchers have also attempted to find significant variance between the financial performance of such companies that embrace sustainable business practices and those whose concern for social, environmental, and governance competencies is less evident.

The results of these studies have relevance not only for managers, analysts and investors, but also policymakers and regulators who are increasingly turning their attention to such non-financial areas of corporate performance.

Presumably, finance theory supports the argument that a company’s overall value increases as it better incorporates sustainable business strategies into its daily operations. This is based on the logical connection between the implementation of such strategies and the stabilization of future cash flows and reduction of corporate risk exposure.

To date, there has been a disparity in the results of existing Corporate Sustainability Performance (CSP) – Corporate Financial Performance (CFP) studies much of which can be attributed to the ways in which corporate social, environmental, economic, and governance

performance is determined and how financial performance is measured. While there are many established metrics for financial performance, including the market price of a firm's stock or financial ratio analyses of historical performance, the metrics for non-financial corporate financial performance are still in the early stages of development.

For those investors that believe that CSP is relevant to the firm selection aspect of their investment strategy, they have the option of more *passively* investing in one of the hundreds of "socially responsible" mutual funds that invests in a diversified group of sustainable companies, selected based on one of the myriad of established rubrics used by fund managers that seek to identify such companies. Alternatively, an investor can adopt a more *active* investing approach, whereby "sustainable" stocks are selected based on a more in-depth assessment of a firm's CSP; perhaps attempting to exploit informational inefficiencies in the market for such sustainability-focused firm equities.

Our study will review existing literature on the measurement of Corporate Sustainability Performance and Corporate Financial Performance, examine how CSP data is assimilated into the marketplace, and attempt to determine if one of these two approaches to sustainable investing (active vs. passive – not taking into account transaction costs) would have yielded better results on a risk-adjusted basis over the past decade in global equity markets.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Current theoretical discussions of the relationship between a company's financial performance and broader-based assessments of firm performance attempt to yield insights into whether non-financial performance measures add any new information for corporate stakeholders, especially investors. Existing CSP-CFP studies normally seek to determine if a firm's choice of sustainable business practices enables it to achieve better financial results. Since researchers have used a variety of traditional metrics for financial, and non-financial performance, results have been mixed (see Orlitzky, et al, 2003, for meta-analysis of 52 studies). Some studies have found that companies which demonstrate stronger performance in non-financial areas, such as environmental, social, and governance (ESG) also have comparatively more financial accomplishments, while others have failed to establish that link. Where the data have supported this link, the financial valuation premise follows that firm value increases because sustainability practices stabilize future cash flows and lower forward risk. The question that investors must consider is whether such information is already reflected in market prices. If not, investors should endeavor to identify those firms whose equity values do not yet fully reflect their non-financial efforts. In investment analysis, such firms would be considered "undervalued" and good candidates for adding to a value-focused portfolio of corporate stocks.

### ***Measuring Corporate Sustainability Performance – Existing Studies***

The growing market for ratings of non-financial performance is driven by the investor's need for more (and better) information about public companies' environmental, social, and governance activities. As analysts seek insight into future financial performance, they are increasingly examining other aspects of firm output that are less-obvious, and perhaps, not yet priced by financial market participants. Such non-financial measures face greater scrutiny as investors attempt to (1) identify which aspects of sustainability most highly correlate with inclusion in "sustainable funds" and (2) discover which of these aspects most frequently contribute to future financial success.

For example, Berry and Junkus (2013) found that investors generally consider environmental practices to be the most important aspect of a firm's sustainability performance, and that investors prefer to reward firms that display positive social behavior (i.e. "positive screening") rather than excluding firms for particular products or practices ("negative

screening”). Flammer (2013) finds ‘that companies reported to have behaved responsibly toward the environment experience a significant stock increase’.

One of the shortcomings of such existing studies is that social and environmental performance are distinct, non-financial outputs. Moreover, non-financial performance has not, historically, been measured and reported on a large scale to the investing public. Therefore, comprehensive assessments of Corporate Sustainability Performance (CSP) have been difficult. There have been a number of recent attempts, however, to develop broad-based measures of sustainability to better inform investors about a firm’s non-financial performance. These measures represent an improvement on existing measures which are based on a single sustainability component – social, environmental, or governance. The inclusion of all three focus areas seems to be, in part, motivated by the hierarchical structure of the 1997 Global Reporting Initiative (see Labuschagne, et al, 2004) as many of the most popular comprehensive rating systems were developed in the early 2000s.

While previous studies that focus on a single facet of non-financial performance are important to the evolution of thought on the topic, more recent studies of the CSP-CFP relationship utilize a more inclusive and multifaceted approach to rating a firm’s social/environmental/governance performance. Some of the more notable rating systems which attempt to measure ‘sustainability performance’ by considering all three of these corporate outputs include the Domini Social 400 Stock Index (see Baird, et al, 2012), the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI), and the Financial Times Sustainability Index (FTSE4Good), as well as a large number of other comprehensive benchmarks dedicated to corporate stocks of a particular country or geographic region ([www.world-exchanges.org/sustainability/m-7-0.php](http://www.world-exchanges.org/sustainability/m-7-0.php)). As indicated by the types of firms that have developed these comprehensive assessments, the primary driving force behind these new measures was investor’s unmet need for better information upon which to select sustainable companies for inclusion in their portfolios.

More recent studies of these sustainability indices attempt to assess the financial impact of a firm’s addition to or removal from a particular index. From an investor’s point of view, we assume the addition of a company to a list would result in a financial market benefit stemming from the recognition of the firm’s sustainability efforts, and enhanced future value. Robinson, et al (2011) find that although there is a sustained increase in the financial value of a firm that is added to the DJSI, there is an insignificant effect when a firm is removed. Conversely, Doh, et al (2010) assert that there is more meaning in being removed from a comprehensive sustainability index (i.e. the Domini Social 400), than being added; which results in no significant impact. With such mixed results, it seems that little informational value is gleaned by simply examining the financial performance firms that are being added to or removed from these sustainable indices.

### ***Measuring Corporate Financial Performance***

The measurement of firm financial performance is well-established, although there are two distinct approaches to financial metrics used in prior CSP-CFP studies. Existing studies focus on accounting- or market-based measures. The findings of such studies do often show that sustainability practices are more apparent in one financial metric versus the other type. For example, Orlitzky’s 2003 meta-analysis that examined 52 prior studies dating back to 1975 found that accounting based measures of financial performance better reflected CSR efforts compared to market-based measures. Many studies, such as Rodgers, et al (2013) find that a firm’s CSR commitment leads to better financial performance on both accounting-based and market-based financial metrics. Overall, most recent studies, whether using accounting-based measures (see Ameer, et al [2012], and Lopez, et al [2007]) or market-based measures (see Hill, et al [2007], and Shank, et al [2005] have found that financial value is created when firms are recognized as being relatively more sustainability-focused than their peers.

The question that arises for sustainability-focused investors is how to best identify firms that are making a long-term strategic commitment to sustainability. For such investors that not only want to reward such commitment by a firm, but also seek to achieve above-market performance to by purchasing these potentially undervalued stocks would benefit significantly from greater insight into the risk-return tradeoffs of such securities. Commitment to sustainability would seem a continuum, with some firms embracing sustainable business practices to a greater extent than others. Several recent CSP-CFP studies have found that a firm's level of commitment does matter in whether the firm enjoys the financial rewards of a sustainable strategy. Barnett and Salomon (2012) find, after categorizing companies as "low", "moderate", or "high" CSP firms, that those with high CSP have the highest CFP, arguing that whether it pays to be good depends on how well a company is able to capitalize on its sustainability efforts. Similarly, Lourenco, et al (2012, 2014) find that financial success is higher for firms with a reputation for sustainability 'leadership' when compared to firms not considered leaders in non-financial performance.

### ***The Valuation Issue and Market Efficiency***

As previously noted, many existing studies have found evidence for the financial market relevance of non-financial performance information. This information is utilized in the formation of many of the existing stock indices that positively screen companies with dedicated sustainability efforts (i.e. the DJSI, Domini Social 400, and FTSE4good). The purpose of the development of these indices was to assist investors in better identifying firms with exceptional sustainability records and a clear commitment to the continuation of such efforts. Finance theory, which posits that the goal of a manager is to maximize shareholder wealth, would support activities by the firm to increase future cash flows or to reduce forward risk. Support of the link between more sustainable firms and lower corporate risk can be found in Lee (2009) and Ghoul, et al (2011). Moreover, investors who believe that a firm's long-term commitment to sustainability impacts the value of a stock, would value new sources of non-financial information for assimilation into their stock screening methodologies.

Currently, the lack of consensus on the impact of CSP and limited availability of non-financial market factors represents a market inefficiency juxtaposed to the established and highly efficient nature of existing financial market factors. This information asymmetry is narrowed as measures for non-financial factors become more comprehensive and more widely used in indices such as the DJSI and DJGI. Therefore, the question increasingly becomes whether sustainability-focused investors can depend on these indices to identify and fully differentiate the most sustainable firms from less sustainable firms and the broader equity market.

### ***Passive versus Active Investment Strategies***

Passive investment strategies are more appropriate for markets where there is high informational efficiency; meaning that sustainability-focused investors may be best served by choosing to merely buy shares in a diversified portfolio of stocks of sustainable firms. Such firms are normally included in broad-based portfolios that have been constructed by selecting companies that have been, in essence, labeled as 'sustainability-focused' by being included in a sustainability index. Theoretically, the newer measures, such as the DJSI, which utilizes a number of non-financial performance data simultaneously, would increase the informational efficiency in the market for sustainable firm equities.

Several recent studies have compared the financial performance of firms selected for inclusion in one of the major sustainability indices to benchmarks of the broader market. Of those, Consolandi, et al (2009) found that the DJSI (focused on sustainable European firms) slightly underperformed market benchmarks from 2001-2006. Xiao, et al (2013) investigated the

role of corporate sustainability (using the DJSI) investment in asset pricing from 2001-2007 and found no significant impact on equity returns. Such results would suggest there is no additional informational value to investors of a firm being included in the comprehensive benchmarks of Dow Jones, Inc. that identify sustainable company stocks. However, the potentially unique role of firms that the DJSI identifies as the ‘leaders’ among the group of sustainable firms has yet to be studied.

Conventional investing wisdom suggests stock investors adopt an active portfolio management strategy in markets that are not relatively efficient, whereby market participants do not possess all relevant information when selecting securities for inclusion in their portfolios. As investors seek to identify sustainable companies, the question is whether the information currently used by such investors is adequate. Although studies have suggested that little relevant information is provided when a firm is selected as a member of the DJSI, It is possible that a firm’s identification as a top-performer in the non-financial arena does have investment value.

Therefore, we seek to examine the CSP-CFP relationship by comparing the risk adjusted stock market returns over the past decade of two distinct, sustainability-focused portfolios constructed using DJSI selected companies. The first portfolio is comprised of all firms that have been added to the index over the past ten years, and the second is comprised of those firms identified as ‘Super Sector Leaders’ of the DJSI. In this way, we will determine whether an investor would have performed better than the overall equity market by passively “buying the index” versus actively buying stocks of only those firms identified by DJSI as sustainability leaders in their respective industries. Since prior studies have found that the level of a firm’s sustainability commitment is relevant, our study will determine whether those companies specifically identified as sustainability leaders do perform better using a market-based, risk-adjusted approach. In addition, since Barnett (2007) found that financial impacts of CSR vary over time, we will divide the 2002-2012 period into three sub-periods to discover any temporal differences.

## **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

Two methodologies were adopted and utilized for assessing returns for Supersector Leaders against the broader market (For this study, the S&P 500 is used as a proxy for the performance of the broader market). The first methodology (“Annual Supersector Leader Portfolio”) consisted of creating a balanced portfolio out of the 18 to 19 companies named in each class from 2002 through 2012 and regressing their mean (arithmetic) monthly returns from the time of each classes’ inception through March 2013 against the monthly returns of two indexes, the S&P 500 and the Dow Jones Sustainability Index World Diversified (WISGI). The second methodology (“Cumulative Portfolio”) consisted of creating a balanced cumulative portfolio of Supersector Leaders. Beginning in 2002, a portfolio was created out of the 18 original Supersector Leaders. Each time a new company was named as a Supersector Leader in a subsequent annual RobecoSAM Corporate Sustainability Assessment, it would be added to the portfolio from that date. Meanwhile any company previously named a Supersector leader would remain within the portfolio regardless of whether or not it was again named as a Supersector Leader in any subsequent year. Hence, the cumulative portfolio annually increased in size as demonstrated in the following graph.



#### *Annual Supersector Leader Portfolio*

The first step in analyzing the returns of the Supersector Leaders, as ranked by the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (based on the RobecoSAM Corporate Sustainability Index), was to obtain the monthly returns of each individual company named as a supersector leader, by year (i.e. the monthly returns of the 2002 Supersector Leader class were gathered from September 4, 2002 through March 1, 2013 and averaged).

Secondly, the mean (arithmetic) monthly returns of each Supersector Leader class, by year, were compared to the monthly returns of the S&P 500 in terms of Jensen's Alpha, M-Square, the Treynor Measure, and the Sharpe Ratio. In essence, a portfolio was created from each annual class of Supersector Leaders from 2002 through 2012 and compared to the monthly returns of the broad S&P 500. The results of this comparison were then regressed against the returns of the S&P 500 to test the significance of the results at a 95% confidence level.

Thirdly, as a means of comparison, the monthly returns of the DJSI World were compared to the S&P 500 by the same measures and time periods and regressed to test significance at a 95% confidence level.

Finally, the of Jensen's Alpha, M-Square, the Treynor Measure, and the Sharpe Ratio of the DJSI World (WISGI) and of each annual Supersector Leader class were compared relative to their respective returns against the S&P 500, thereby creating a means to determine whether an individual investor would have achieved greater returns from the DJSI World, the S&P 500, or each annual Supersector Leader class, all else equal, from the inception date of each annual class through March 1, 2013.

#### *Measures of Performance*

- A. Jensen's Alpha:  $\alpha_p = r_p - [r_f + \beta_p(r_m - r_m)]$
- B. M-Square:  $M^2 = (S_p - S_M) * \sigma_M$
- C. Treynor's Measure:  $T_p = \frac{r_p - r_f}{\beta_p}$

$$D. \text{ Sharpe's Measure: } S_p = \frac{r_p - r_f}{\sigma_p} \text{ }^1$$

#### *Cumulative Supersector Leader Portfolio Analysis*

The second means by which the returns of the DJSI Supersector Leaders were analyzed was by creating cumulative list of Supersector Leaders and obtaining the monthly returns of each company named since 2002 from the date in which the company was first identified as a “Supersector Leader” until March 1, 2013. In this way, a cumulative portfolio of companies was created in which all supersector leaders are held in a portfolio beginning on each company’s respective date of initial pronouncement. The average monthly returns of all companies held in this cumulative portfolio during each given month were then compared to the monthly returns of the S&P 500 (broad market proxy) in terms of Jensen’s Alpha, M-Square, the Treynor Measure, and the Sharpe Ratio for the four time periods (1-year, 3-year, 5-year, and the total time period from 9/4/2002 through 3/1/2013). The results of this comparison were then regressed against the returns of the S&P 500 to test the significance of the results at a 95% confidence level. The cumulative holdings of Supersector Leaders are demonstrated below:

<u>Year</u>	<u># Companies Added</u>	<u>Total # Companies in Portfolio</u>
2002	18	18
2003	5	23
2004	5	28
2005	6	34
2006	5	39
2007	5	44
2008	8	52
2009	7	59
2010	4	63
2011	8	71
2012	5	76

Secondly, as a means of comparison, the monthly returns of the DJSI World were compared to the S&P 500 by the same measures and time periods and regressed to test significance at a 95% confidence level.

Finally, the of Jensen’s Alpha, M-Square, the Treynor Measure, and the Sharpe Ratio of the DJSI World (WISGI) and of the cumulative Supersector Leader portfolio were compared relative to their respective returns against the S&P 500, thereby creating a means to determine whether an individual investor would have achieved greater returns from the DJSI World, the S&P 500, or the cumulative Supersector Leader portfolio from September 1, 2002 through March 1, 2013, all else equal.

For investors, this methodology would reflect a belief that once a company is named as a Supersector Leader, it remains a leader of corporate sustainability, which is supported by the fact that 44 companies were named as a Supersector Leader more than once from 2002 through 2012 and that 76 companies account for the 203 Supersector Leaders named from 2002 through 2012. Additionally, this methodology allows for reduced transaction costs compared to the Annual

---

<sup>1</sup> See Bodie, Kane, and Marcus (2014), pp. 837-847

Supersector Leader Portfolio Methodology as the only transactions occurring would be the addition of the approximately 4 to 8 companies named as Supersector Leaders that are not already included in the cumulative portfolio (this does not account for portfolio re-balancing).

## FINDINGS

### *Annual Supersector Leader Portfolio*

The results of the Annual Supersector Leader Portfolio analysis are presented in the following four tables:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Jensen's</u>	<u>M-Square</u>	<u>Significant at 95%?</u>
2012	0.1476	0.0559	No
2011	-0.0010	-0.0275	Yes
2010	-0.0219	-0.0194	Yes
2009	-0.0077	-0.0088	Yes
2008	0.0141	0.0111	Yes
2007	0.0130	0.0118	Yes
2006	0.0167	0.0140	Yes
2005	0.0185	0.0184	Yes
2004	0.0260	0.0245	Yes
2003	0.0201	0.0174	Yes
2002	0.0258	0.0210	Yes

The Jensen's Alpha and M-Square performance measures (represented in the table above) provide risk-adjusted comparative statistics whereby the performance each annual Supersector class is compared to the baseline market proxy (the S&P 500). It then follows that a positive Jensen's Alpha or M-Square indicates that the Supersector Portfolio outperformed the S&P500 and vice versa. Therefore, it can be interpreted that with 95% significance that the Annual Supersector Leader Portfolio outperformed the S&P500 each year from 2002 through 2008 and underperformed from 2009 to 2011. The 2012 results did not provide a statistically significant indicator of performance.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Treynor (Leaders)</u>	<u>Treynor (S&amp;P500)</u>	<u>Sharpe (Leaders)</u>	<u>Sharpe (S&amp;P500)</u>
2012	<b>1.4763</b>	0.0755	<b>0.7737</b>	0.4444
2011	0.1121	<b>0.1131</b>	0.3410	<b>0.4503</b>
2010	-0.0012	<b>0.0184</b>	-0.0077	<b>0.1421</b>
2009	0.0072	<b>0.0151</b>	0.0430	<b>0.1028</b>
2008	<b>0.0163</b>	0.0037	<b>0.0790</b>	0.0198
2007	<b>-0.0024</b>	-0.0140	<b>-0.0118</b>	-0.0761
2006	<b>0.0055</b>	-0.0088	<b>0.0298</b>	-0.0512
2005	<b>0.0124</b>	-0.0070	<b>0.0701</b>	-0.0433
2004	<b>0.0248</b>	-0.0051	<b>0.1253</b>	-0.0331
2003	<b>0.0177</b>	-0.0031	<b>0.0955</b>	-0.0211
2002	<b>0.0288</b>	0.0011	<b>0.1478</b>	0.0073

Secondly, this portfolio was tested against the S&P500 using Treynor's Measure and Sharpe's Measure, the results of which are shown in the previous table. These risk-adjusted measures for the Supersector Portfolio can be directly compared to the S&P500 baseline, as shown above, with the higher return representing the better statistical performance. Therefore, it can again be interpreted that with 95% significance that the Annual Supersector Leader Portfolio outperformed the S&P500 each year from 2002 through 2008 and underperformed from 2009 to 2011. The 2012 results once again did not provide a statistically significant indicator of performance.

Thirdly, the following two tables also compared the performance of the Annual Supersector Leader Portfolio to the performance of the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (WISGI), again using the S&P500 as the baseline market proxy.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Jensen's (Leaders)</u>	<u>Jensen's (DJSI)</u>	<u>M-Square (Leaders)</u>	<u>M-Square (DJSI)</u>	<u>Significant at 95%?</u>
2012	<b>0.1476</b>	0.0456	<b>0.0559</b>	0.0199	No
2011	<b>-0.0010</b>	-0.0637	<b>-0.0275</b>	-0.0567	Yes
2010	<b>-0.0219</b>	-0.0260	<b>-0.0194</b>	-0.0206	Yes
2009	<b>-0.0077</b>	-0.0222	<b>-0.0088</b>	-0.0190	Yes
2008	<b>0.0141</b>	-0.0106	<b>0.0111</b>	-0.0090	Yes
2007	<b>0.0130</b>	-0.0101	<b>0.0118</b>	-0.0078	Yes
2006	<b>0.0167</b>	-0.0063	<b>0.0140</b>	-0.0048	Yes
2005	<b>0.0185</b>	-0.0035	<b>0.0184</b>	-0.0025	Yes
2004	<b>0.0260</b>	-0.0013	<b>0.0245</b>	-0.0008	Yes
2003	<b>0.0201</b>	-0.0005	<b>0.0174</b>	-0.0002	Yes
2002	<b>0.0258</b>	-0.0005	<b>0.0210</b>	-0.0005	Yes

<u>Year</u>	<u>Treynor (Leaders)</u>	<u>Treynor (DJSI)</u>	<u>Sharpe (Leaders)</u>	<u>Sharpe (DJSI)</u>
2012	<b>1.4763</b>	0.1590	<b>0.7737</b>	0.5613
2011	<b>0.1121</b>	0.0616	<b>0.3410</b>	0.2245
2010	<b>-0.0012</b>	-0.0024	<b>-0.0077</b>	-0.0176
2009	<b>0.0072</b>	-0.0042	<b>0.0430</b>	-0.0265
2008	<b>0.0163</b>	-0.0055	<b>0.0790</b>	-0.0281
2007	<b>-0.0024</b>	-0.0230	<b>-0.0118</b>	-0.1183
2006	<b>0.0055</b>	-0.0144	<b>0.0298</b>	-0.0789
2005	<b>0.0124</b>	-0.0101	<b>0.0701</b>	-0.0587
2004	<b>0.0248</b>	-0.0063	<b>0.1253</b>	-0.0383
2003	<b>0.0177</b>	-0.0036	<b>0.0955</b>	-0.0228
2002	<b>0.0288</b>	0.0006	<b>0.1478</b>	0.0041

As is demonstrated in these two tables, it can be concluded that the Annual Supersector Portfolio outperformed the Dow Jones Sustainability Index in all years on a risk-adjusted basis with 95% statistical significance (with the exception of the 2012 results, which were not statistically significant due to sample size).

*Cumulative Supersector Leader Portfolio Analysis*

The results of the Cumulative Supersector Leader Portfolio analysis are presented in the following four tables:

<u>Investment Period</u>	<u>M-Square (Leaders)</u>	<u>Jensens (Leaders)</u>	<u>Significant at 95%?</u>
9/2002 to 3/2013 (Total)	0.0135	0.0156	Yes
9/2002 to 9/2003 (1-Year)	-0.0086	-0.0078	Yes
9/2002 to 9/2005 (3-Year)	0.0125	0.0149	Yes
9/2002 to 9/2007 (5-Year)	0.0184	0.0253	Yes

For the Cumulative Supersector Portfolio analysis, the Jensen's Alpha and M-Square performance measures were once again utilized to provide risk-adjusted comparative statistics whereby the performance each annual Supersector class is compared to the baseline market proxy (the S&P 500). It then follows that a positive Jensen's Alpha or M-Square indicates that the Supersector Portfolio outperformed the S&P500 and vice versa. Therefore, it can be interpreted that with 95% significance that the Cumulative Supersector Leader Portfolio outperformed the S&P500 in the 3-Year, 5-Year and 11-Year Maximum Investment Periods, and underperformed the S&P-500 in the 1-Year Investment Period from 2002 to 2003.

<u>Investment Period</u>	<u>Treynor (Leaders)</u>	<u>Treynor (S&amp;P500)</u>	<u>Sharpe (Leaders)</u>	<u>Sharpe (S&amp;P500)</u>
9/2002 to 3/2013 (Total)	<b>0.0160</b>	0.0011	<b>0.1243</b>	0.0073
9/2002 to 9/2003 (1-Year)	0.0336	<b>0.0414</b>	0.2128	<b>0.2686</b>
9/2002 to 9/2005 (3-Year)	<b>0.0368</b>	0.0214	<b>0.3064</b>	0.1936
9/2002 to 9/2007 (5-Year)	<b>0.0445</b>	0.0177	<b>0.3730</b>	0.1831

Secondly, this portfolio was also tested against the S&P500 using Treynor's Measure and Sharpe's Measure, the results of which are shown in the previous table. These risk-adjusted measures for the Supersector Portfolio can be directly compared to the S&P500 baseline, as shown above, with the higher return representing the better statistical performance. Therefore, these measures confirm the results of the Jensen's Alpha and M-Square measures in finding that with 95% significance that the Cumulative Supersector Leader Portfolio outperformed the S&P500 in the 3-Year, 5-Year and 11-Year Maximum Investment Periods, and underperformed the S&P-500 in the 1-Year Investment Period from 2002 to 2003.

Finally, the following two tables also compared the performance of the Cumulative Supersector Leader Portfolio to the performance of the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (WISGI), again using the S&P500 as the baseline market proxy.

<u>Investment Period</u>	<u>M-Square (Leaders)</u>	<u>M-Square (DJSI)</u>	<u>Jensens (Leaders)</u>	<u>Jensens (DJSI)</u>	<u>Significant at 95%?</u>
9/2002 to 3/2013 (Total)	<b>0.0135</b>	-0.0005	<b>0.0156</b>	-0.0005	Yes
9/2002 to 9/2003 (1-Year)	-0.0086	<b>0.0018</b>	-0.0078	<b>0.0033</b>	Yes
9/2002 to 9/2005 (3-Year)	<b>0.0125</b>	0.0064	<b>0.0149</b>	0.0081	Yes
9/2002 to 9/2007 (5-Year)	<b>0.0184</b>	0.0094	<b>0.0253</b>	0.0117	Yes

<u>Investment Period</u>	<u>Treynor (Leaders)</u>	<u>Treynor (DJSI)</u>	<u>Sharpe (Leaders)</u>	<u>Sharpe (DJSI)</u>
9/2002 to 3/2013 (Total)	<b>0.0160</b>	0.0006	<b>0.1243</b>	0.0073
9/2002 to 9/2003 (1-Year)	0.0336	<b>0.0445</b>	0.2128	<b>0.2806</b>
9/2002 to 9/2005 (3-Year)	<b>0.0368</b>	0.0290	<b>0.3064</b>	0.2513
9/2002 to 9/2007 (5-Year)	<b>0.0445</b>	0.0177	<b>0.3730</b>	0.2798

As is demonstrated in these two tables, it can be concluded that the Cumulative Supersector Portfolio outperformed the Dow Jones Sustainability Index in the 3-Year, 5-Year and 11-Year Maximum Investment Periods, and underperformed the DJSI in the 1-Year Investment Period from 2002 to 2003.

### **Interpretation of Results**

These results, which show statistically significant superior returns to the market (on a risk adjusted basis) over longer term periods, are consistent with the supposition that stocks of sustainable firms would show most benefits over a long-term time horizon.

The results of this study point to a potential inefficiency as the market may not fully understand how to incorporate the effects of sustainability practices into security pricing. These results also indicate that an investor could have achieved above-average returns by investing in sustainability leaders over the last ten years based on the existence of this inefficiency. Such information could provide an incentive and positive market pressure to be a leader in sustainability, which would provide newfound energy and headwinds in the sustainability movement, which has previously been driven through disincentives and regulation. Such positive market pressure is also a more economically efficient means of effecting change in the market in the allocation of supply and demand.

For investors with an inclination to invest in or reward sustainable businesses, this study provides a comparison of active versus passive strategies as well as a potential blueprint for achieving competitive or even above-average returns. The data in this study demonstrate that investments in sustainability leaders over the last ten years has been profitable compared to the broad market, but has vastly outperformed sustainability indexes over the same time period, which utilize a lesser degree of selectivity than the sample portfolios of supersector leaders.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Our results shed additional light on the ongoing debate over whether an investor can “do well by doing good”. Moreover, the results provide information regarding not only “if” sustainable investing is rewarded, but also “how” this financial payoff would have been earned in the past decade when selecting sustainable firms stocks.

We find that an investor can achieve superior financial returns by selecting sustainable firm stocks, but that the method of firm selection does have impact, judging by the performance of sustainable firm equity investments over the 2002-2012 period. By measuring financial

performance based on the risk-adjusted stock returns of two distinct groups of sustainable firms, our analysis reveals that only DJSI's "Super Sector Leaders" outperformed the rest of the market on this basis. Those sustainable companies that were simply added to Dow Jones Sustainability Index did not outperform their peers over the period studied.

The nuances of the approach taken may explain why these results yield new insights into how investors might increase the likelihood that a sustainable investing strategy would reap financial rewards. First, we measure financial payoff using four, comprehensive return metrics that all measure a portfolio's success by simultaneously considering stock returns and the level of risk taken to earn those returns.

Prior work has hypothesized that firms embracing sustainable business practices are comparatively more successful, financially, either because they earned higher returns, or were seen by markets as having lower risk. So, by including all of these measures, we were able to check the results for consistency since each metric considers a different aspect of overall corporate risk. All four yielded consistent results: only companies that were identified as sustainability leaders would have earned an investor superior returns during the period studied.

A second nuance of our approach was the separation of the ten-year performance of the sustainability portfolios into sub-periods/ time "buckets" to help determine any relevance of shorter- versus longer-term investment horizons for sustainable investors. These results, which show statistically significant superior returns to the market (on a risk adjusted basis) over longer term periods, are consistent with the supposition that stocks of sustainable firms would show most benefits over a long-term time horizon, and may not earn abnormally high returns for short-term focused investors. In other words, embracing sustainable business practices is a long-term, value-maximizing strategy.

## REFERENCES

- Ameer, R. and R. Othman. (2012). Sustainability practices and corporate financial performance: a study based on the top global corporations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 108, 61-79.
- Baird, P., P. Geylani, and J. Roberts. (2012). Corporate social and financial performance re-examined: industry effects in a linear mixed model analysis. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 109, 367-388.
- Barnett, M. (2007). Stakeholder influence capacity and the variability of financial returns to corporate social responsibility. *Academy of Management Review*, 32, 794-816.
- Barnett, M., and R. Salomon. (2013). Does it pay to be *really* good? Addressing the shape of the relationship between social and environmental performance. *Strategic Management Journal*, 33, 1304-1320.
- Berry, T. and J. Junkus (2013). Socially responsible investing: an investor perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 112, 707-720.
- Bodie, Z., A. Kane, and A. Marcus (2014). *Investments*, 10<sup>th</sup> Edition. McGraw-Hill Education.
- Consolandi, C., A. Jaiswal-Dale, E. Poggiani, and A. Vercelli (2009). Global standards and ethical stock indexes: the case of the Dow Jones Sustainability Index. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 87, 185-197.
- Doh, J. (2010). Does the market respond to an endorsement of social responsibility? The role of institution, information, and legitimacy? *Journal of Management*, 36, 1461-1485.

- Flammer, C. (2013). Corporate social responsibility and shareholder reaction: the environmental awareness of investors. *Academy of Management Journal*, 56, 758-781.
- Ghoul, S. (2011). Does corporate social responsibility affect the cost of capital? *Journal of Banking and Finance*, 35, 2388-2408.
- Hill, R., T. Ainscough, T. Shank, D. Manullang. (2007). Corporate social responsibility and socially responsible investing: a global perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 70, 165-174.
- Labuschagne, C., A. Brent, and R. van Erck (2004). Assessing the sustainability performance of industries. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 13, 1-13.
- Lee, D. (2009). Corporate sustainability performance and idiosyncratic risk: a global perspective. *Financial Review*, 44, 213-237.
- Lopez, M., A. Garcia, and L. Rodriguez. (2007). Sustainable development and corporate performance: A study based on the Dow Jones Sustainability Index. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 75, 285-300.
- Lourenco, I., M. Branco, J. Curto, and T. Eugenio (2012). How does the market value corporate sustainability performance? *Journal of Business Ethics*, 108, 417-428.
- Lourenco, I., J. Callen, M. Branco, and J. Curto (2014). The value relevance of reputation for sustainability leadership. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 119, 17-28.
- Orlitzky, M. (2003). Corporate social and financial performance: a meta-analysis. *Organization Studies*, 24, 403-441.
- Robinson, M., A. Kleffner, and S. Bertels (2011). Signaling sustainability leadership: empirical evidence of the value of DJSI membership. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 101, 493-505.
- Rodgers, W., H. Choy, and A. Guiral. (2013). Do investors value a firm's commitment to social activities? *Journal of Business Ethics*, 114, 607-623.
- Shank, T., D. Manullang, and R. Hill. (2005). "Doing well while doing good" revisited: a study of socially responsible firms' short-term versus long-term performance. *Managerial Finance*, 30, 33-45.
- World Federation of Exchanges: Exchanges and Sustainable Investment. ([www.world-exchanges.org/sustainability/m-7-0.php](http://www.world-exchanges.org/sustainability/m-7-0.php)).
- Xiao, Y., R. Faff, P. Gharghori, D. Lee (2013). An empirical study of the world price of sustainability. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 114, 297-310.