

New rules provide 2011 tax planning opportunities

Sunset was postponed last December, at least in the world of taxes. Many existing laws, which had been due to expire, or “sunset” at the end of 2010, were extended

through 2012. At the same time, new rules that can impact your tax planning came into effect. With so many changes, you will want to make sure you understand the possibilities available to you as you finalize last year’s return and look ahead to 2011. Here are some suggestions.

■ Business tax planning

There is a new twist on an existing option for accelerated write-off of assets you purchase from September 9, 2010, through December 31, 2011. You can choose to expense 100% of the cost of new equipment, such as machinery, some vehicles, and computers, under expanded “bonus” depreciation rules.

While this sounds similar to Section 179, which also allows immediate expensing of assets you would otherwise have to write off over several years, differences between the two methods exist.

For instance, the amount of Section 179 expensing you can claim may be limited by your income. In contrast, bonus depreciation can create an operating loss that you may be able to carry back to prior years to generate a refund.

Another depreciation break was also extended: the 15-year life for certain

leasehold and retail improvements and restaurant buildings and improvements. These assets will no longer qualify for 15-year depreciation after 2011.

And what about the rules for Section 179? The expensing limit was increased to \$500,000. Your deduction begins to shrink if you buy more than \$2 million of assets.



■ Investment planning

Capital gain rates will remain at a maximum of 15% (and a minimum of 0%) through December 31, 2012. The rates apply to qualified dividends and long-term gains from investments you sell. That makes 2011 a good time to implement strategies for potential tax savings.

One example: You may be able to manage your income to stay within the 10% or 15% income tax brackets, which would allow you to take advantage of the 0% capital gain rate.

Alternatively, you could gift appreciated stock to family members in those brackets. For 2011, the cutoff for the 15% bracket is \$69,000 of taxable income when you’re married filing jointly (\$34,500 for singles).

■ Estate and gift tax planning

The new rules for estates include a maximum tax rate of 35% and a \$5 million exemption for 2011 and 2012. The exemption is the amount you can leave to heirs, tax-free, and it applies to lifetime gifts as well. Therefore, you and your spouse could gift up to \$10 million of cash, investments, or ownership in a business without incurring gift tax. That is in addition to your annual exclusion of \$13,000 per recipient.

Estates of persons who died in 2010 have the option of applying the restored estate tax rules and receiving a step-up in basis on property passing to heirs or having no estate tax but using a carryover of the decedent’s basis in property.

The December tax law contains other provisions that offer planning opportunities – almost all of which are temporary. Please give us a call for details and planning guidance. ♦



The deadline for filing your 2010 individual tax returns is April 18, 2011. Our professional team is at your service. Call us today at 219-864-7000 to schedule your appointment.



JOE'S TAX TALK

By Joe Laciak

More options for tax refunds

Last year, you could use your tax refund to purchase U.S. Series I Savings Bonds in your name. This year, you can buy savings bonds for yourself and up to two other individuals.

Up to \$5,000 in bonds can be purchased in \$50 increments. Also new this year: You may request a paper check for the balance if you prefer that to direct deposit.

Electronic deposits required

Businesses can no longer use paper coupons (Form 8109: Federal Tax Deposit Coupon) to deposit federal taxes to an authorized bank. Instead, deposits must be made using the Electronic Federal Tax Payment System (EFTPS) online or by telephone. Businesses with taxes below certain thresholds may still remit taxes due with the tax return being filed.

Filing threshold raised

Tax-exempt organizations are required to file annual reports with the IRS. Those with gross receipts below a certain threshold amount can file an E-postcard rather than a longer version of Form 990. The IRS has just raised that threshold amount to \$50,000, an increase over the previous filing threshold of \$25,000.

The deadline for nonprofit filings is the 15th day of the fifth month after their year-end. For calendar-year organizations, the filing deadline for 2010 reports is May 16, 2011. ♦

YOUR BUSINESS

Make your business plan realistic and useful

Many prospective entrepreneurs regard business plans as annoying academic

exercises, useful only to provide file stuffing for potential lenders or investors. Ironically, lenders and investors who receive such plans are apt to view them the same way and move on to the next applicant.

A real business plan should be regarded as a useful and dynamic tool. It should be able to help guide business decisions and serve as a yardstick for measuring outcomes. If external events invalidate some aspect of the plan, it should be revised to conform to the new evidence. Thus, the plan can continue to serve as a relevant guide while remaining ready for use as a reference for providers of capital.

A useful plan must be grounded in reality. Start by defining a significant customer problem that your proposed product or service can solve. The problem's existence should be supported by real evidence such as surveys, verifiable interviews, or marketing research studies. These sources should also help clarify your prospective customer base; i.e., the group that actually has the problem your product or service will solve.

Next, explain how you will reach your customer base and motivate these people to buy. Once again, your assertions should be based on hard evidence, such as surveys and interviews of actual prospects. You

should also include any secondary evidence, such as published studies, that supports the size and accessibility of your market.

Wherever possible, your surveys or interviews should be conducted using actual members of your prospective customer base. This means you must either conduct the research yourself or hire an outside professional to do the legwork.

Every business has particular factors that are vital to success, such as location, owner or employee skills, or access to essential materials. Your plan should identify the vital factors applicable to your business and explain how you will meet their requirements.

Be careful to ensure that your financial projections are as realistic as possible. Revenue projections should be supported by market research to the extent possible. Projected cost categories can be compiled from published materials, but realistic dollar costs should be determined through contacts with prospective suppliers. Try to identify potential pitfalls (such as seasonal revenue variations or inventory shortages) and provide concrete and supportable contingency plans for dealing with them.

If you would like help with developing your business plan, contact our office. ♦



MARK YOUR CALENDAR...

APRIL

18 – Deadline for filing 2010 individual tax returns.

18 – Deadline for filing 2010 partnership returns.

18 – Deadline for filing 2010 gift tax returns.

18 – Deadline for making 2010 IRA contributions.

18 – First installment of 2011 individual estimated tax is due.

MAY

16 – Deadline for calendar-year nonprofit organizations to file information returns. ♦

A new baby can bring a lower tax bill

If you had a baby in 2010, or you're planning on having one in 2011, you

are not only getting a little bundle of joy, but you are also getting a significant tax deduction. The amount of the deductions and credits certainly will not cover the cost of raising your child, but every little bit of tax savings helps. A few of the tax issues that you should be aware of include the following items.

Additional exemption. Your new baby generates an additional exemption to claim on your return, and with the 2010 exemption level at \$3,650 (\$3,700 for 2011), that could equate to some significant tax savings.

Child tax credit. You are also allowed a \$1,000 credit against your taxes for your new family addition. And if your tax liability is less than the maximum credit, Uncle Sam will give you a refund for the difference.

Dependent care credit. If you pay for child care to allow you to work or look for work, you may qualify for the dependent care credit.

Do not overlook savings for college. The sooner you can start saving, the more you can accumulate to be used for future education expenses. Here are three tax-advantaged ways to save for your new baby's future college expenses.

Coverdell education savings account. You can deposit up to \$2,000 annually into this account with withdrawals treated as tax-free if used for education.

529 college savings plan.

This is another savings vehicle that allows you to put away even larger amounts for college expenses, with the earnings on the account treated as tax-free if used for education.

Roth IRA. When your little one gets a bit older and begins to work, consider depositing some of that income into a Roth IRA account. This account can be used for education, or just for general investment, with no taxes due on qualified withdrawals.

So do not overlook the benefits in the tax code if you have a new addition to the family! ♦



2011 Tax Numbers

Standard deduction	
• Single	\$ 5,800
• Joint returns and surviving spouses	\$11,600
• Married filing separately	\$ 5,800
• Head of household	\$ 8,500
• Additional for elderly or blind (married)	\$ 1,150
• Additional for elderly or blind (single)	\$ 1,450
Personal exemption	\$ 3,700
Adoption credit	\$13,360
"Kiddie tax" threshold	\$ 1,900
"Nanny tax" threshold	\$ 1,700
Social security tax wage base	\$106,800
Medicare tax wage base	No limit
Social security earnings limit	
• Below full retirement age	\$14,160
• Full retirement age	No limit
Maximum retirement plan contributions	
• IRA for those under age 50	\$ 5,000
• IRA for those 50 and over	\$ 6,000
• SIMPLE plan for those under age 50	\$11,500
• SIMPLE plan for those 50 and over	\$14,000
• 401(k) plan for those under age 50	\$16,500
• 401(k) plan for those 50 and over	\$22,000
Income limit for IRA deductibility (with company pension)	
• Single/Head of household	\$56,000 – 66,000
• Joint	\$90,000 – 110,000
• When spouse has company pension	\$169,000 – 179,000
• Married filing separately	\$0 – 10,000
Income limit for Roth IRA eligibility	
• Single/Head of household	\$107,000 – 122,000
• Joint	\$169,000 – 179,000
• Married filing separately	\$0 – 10,000
• Rollover of regular IRA to Roth IRA	No income limit
Health savings account contribution limit	
• Individual	\$3,050
• Family	\$6,150
• Additional for 55 & older	\$1,000
Automobile standard mileage rate	
• Business	51¢
• Medical/moving expense	19¢
• Charitable work	14¢
Estate tax top rate	35%
Estate tax exclusion	\$5,000,000
Annual gift tax exclusion (per donee)	\$13,000
Alternative minimum tax exemption	
• Single	\$48,450
• Married, joint	\$74,450
• Married, separate	\$37,225
Section 179 deduction limit	\$500,000
Section 179 purchase limit	\$2,000,000

Are you saving enough?

With the economic downturn still fresh in the minds of most Americans, you would think rates of saving would be climbing through the roof. Surely people recognize – at long last – the need to diligently save more money. After all, the job market is unstable, the stock market uncertain, and housing values notoriously unreliable. But one recent study showed that American savings rates have increased only slightly in the past decade, from 2.9% to 3.6%. That is substantially less than Americans were saving in the 1980s and much lower than savings rates in some other developed countries.

*** So how can we ramp up our savings?** Clearly, cutting back on cable television channels, packing a lunch, or dropping a magazine subscription will not generate substantial savings. If you are really committed to building wealth, it is essential to focus on the big stuff. For many Americans, that means attacking household debt with a vengeance.

If your credit card payment is big, your car payment bigger, and your mortgage payment even bigger, your savings accounts may be starved. And without enough cash to cover



Because Your Money Matters

By Geoff Laciak

emergencies, many folks resort to credit cards and lines of credit to cover unforeseen expenses. So the cycle continues.

*** How can you get ahead of the curve?** First, build up an emergency fund before life's inevitable crises happen. How much should you set aside? The general rule is enough to cover three to six months of living expenses. As a first step, track your expenses for a month. Discover how much you really spend on groceries, utilities, and dinners out. Then project those expenses out three to six months.

Next, look at your income. How stable is your job? Do you have one or two salaries? How long might it take to find another job in your field?

Use those factors to determine the target for your emergency account. Finally, think about where to stash your savings. You want the funds to be available – without withdrawal penalties or tax consequences – when you need them. With that in mind, a money-market or interest-paying savings account is often the best place to park an emergency fund.

*** How can you stay on track?**

Once you have an emergency fund, follow these steps to keep your savings plan on track.

Treat your savings as your most important monthly bill. Write a check to savings first, or have your savings automatically deducted from your checking account or paycheck.

Tax-deferred retirement accounts offer a smart way for you to save money for retirement. If your employer offers a 401(k) or SIMPLE retirement plan, contribute the maximum amount allowed. If your employer offers no plan, contribute to an individual retirement account (IRA). The money you contribute to a retirement account can reduce your taxable income and grow tax-free until withdrawn.

When it comes to saving, think “control.” Control the use of your ATM card and credit cards. Get in the habit of giving yourself a regular cash allowance and try to live with it. ♦