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Interest Rates and Banks

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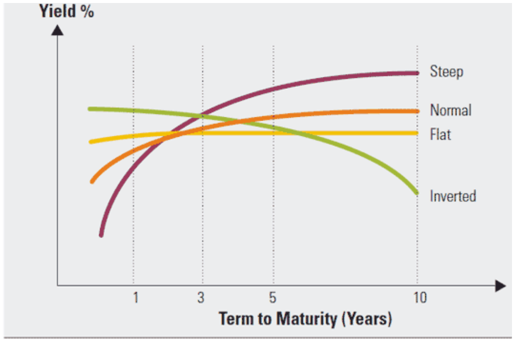
April 2016

One of the most volatile sectors in our economy over the past several years has been the financial sector led by the major banks. Much of this volatility has been due to historically low interest rates and speculation on when the Fed would begin raising rates. As noted in a Wall Street Journal article (9/21/15), this unusually long period of low rates has compressed earnings margins at banks by more than 27% since 2010. Low interest rates can be both positive and negative for banks. On the positive side, it allows the banks to pay much less to their customers for their deposits. On the negative side, the banks get paid a lower rate on their loans. In simple terms, banks make money on the difference (or spread) between the rate they pay on deposits and the rate they receive from loans. Typically, banks can make a larger spread in a higher rate environment. And if longer term (lending) rates increase faster than shorter term (deposit rates), the banks should have an even wider spread.

However, rising rates are not automatically good for banks. As mentioned above, banks normally pay their customers based on short term rates and lend the money at longer term rates. If short term rates rise significantly more than long term rates, you would see a flattening of the yield curve and pressure on the spread. A "steep" yield curve is when short term rates are significantly lower than long term rates. This is an attractive environment for banks. But rising short term rates with little or no rise in longer term rates could result in lower spreads and banks less willing to lend.



Complicating this simple analysis of bank profiability is the fact that many larger banks rely less on the loan spread as a source of revenue than they have in the past. They have numerous sources of revenue, many of which are not sensitive to interest rate movements. Knowing how each bank is impacted in various interest rate scenarios will make stock selction critical in this significant sector of the market.