

Crisis Risk Offset Element: Systematic Trend Following

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Crisis Risk

Crisis risk is the risk that the level of economic activity, assumed and priced in markets, suddenly negatively surprises. Most markets are exposed to this economic growth risk. So, when economic growth severely negatively surprises, it can lead to a correlated selloff in risk assets. In a leveraged financial system, depending on circumstances, this result can be followed by credit contraction, leading to a cascade of illiquidity, margin calls, bond covenant violations, forced sales, negative marks, fear, financial stress, and rising unemployment; resulting in recession or worse.

The Crisis Risk Offset (CRO) class is intended to offset large declines in growth exposed assets. In order to be included in this strategic class, sub-strategies must exhibit the following characteristics:

- Offset growth risk (no or low correlation to equity markets on average)
- Impactful (have similar levels of volatility as equities)
- Scalable and liquid at institutional levels (implemented in deep and liquid markets)
- Positive expected return
- Systematic (not discretionary)
- Cost effective

Systematic Trend Following - one strategy that meets the above criteria:

Systematic Trend Following (STF) is a long-standing investment strategy that involves buying (going long) markets that have been rising and selling (going short) markets that have been declining, in the belief that those price trends will continue. The markets traded by STF managers typically include equity index markets, interest rate markets, currency markets, and commodity markets; the largest and most liquid markets in the world. The signal that indicates the position to be taken in each market is determined by assessing the past return in that market over the relevant look-back horizon. A positive past return is considered an “uptrend” and leads to a long position; a negative past return is considered a “downtrend” and leads to a short position. The strategy holds either a long or short position in every market traded depending upon the signal for that market over the look back period. Trend identification and scaling methods for positions vary by the system utilized by each STF manager.

Discussion:

Trend following is a unique strategy in that it relies only on historical price movements of markets. As long as there is price movement in stocks, bonds, currencies, and commodities; and prices move in such a way that a trend can be determined, then trend following strategies will continue to exist. Several academic and practitioner studies indicate that over long time periods, the return-to-volatility (Sharpe ratio) of systematic trend following has been similar to that of U.S. equities.¹

Since 2001, trend following has exceeded the calendar year return to the S&P 500 five out of fifteen years. However, what is important is that the strategy’s outperformance occurred in years when equity markets posted deeply negative returns. Specifically, in 2002 and 2008, the SG Trend² index, an index of the top, open, trend following managers by AUM, was able to provide offsetting positive returns, outperforming the S&P 500 by 48% and 58%, in 2002 and 2008, respectively.

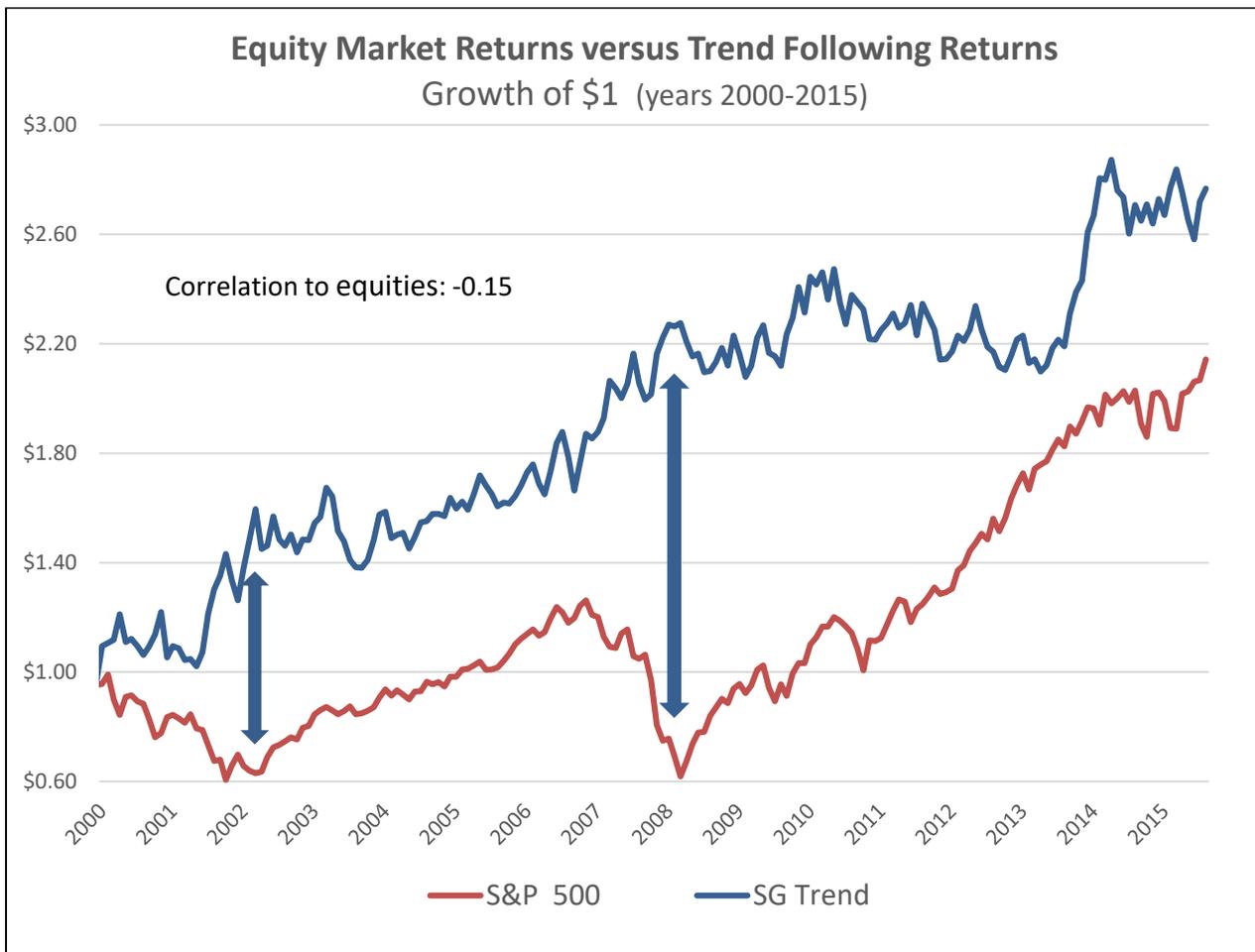
Year ending 12/31	Calendar Year Performance														
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
SG Trend	-0.1	26.1	11.9	2.7	0.8	8.2	8.6	20.9	-4.8	13.1	-7.9	-3.5	2.7	19.7	0.0
S&P 500	-11.9	-22.1	28.7	10.9	4.9	15.8	5.5	-37.0	26.5	15.2	2.1	16.0	32.4	13.7	1.4
Difference	11.8	48.2	-16.8	-8.2	-4.1	-7.6	3.1	57.9	-31.3	-2.1	-10.0	-19.5	-29.7	6.0	-1.4

¹ Source: Brian Hurst et Al., “Demystifying Managed Futures” Journal of Investment Management, 3rd Quarter 2013

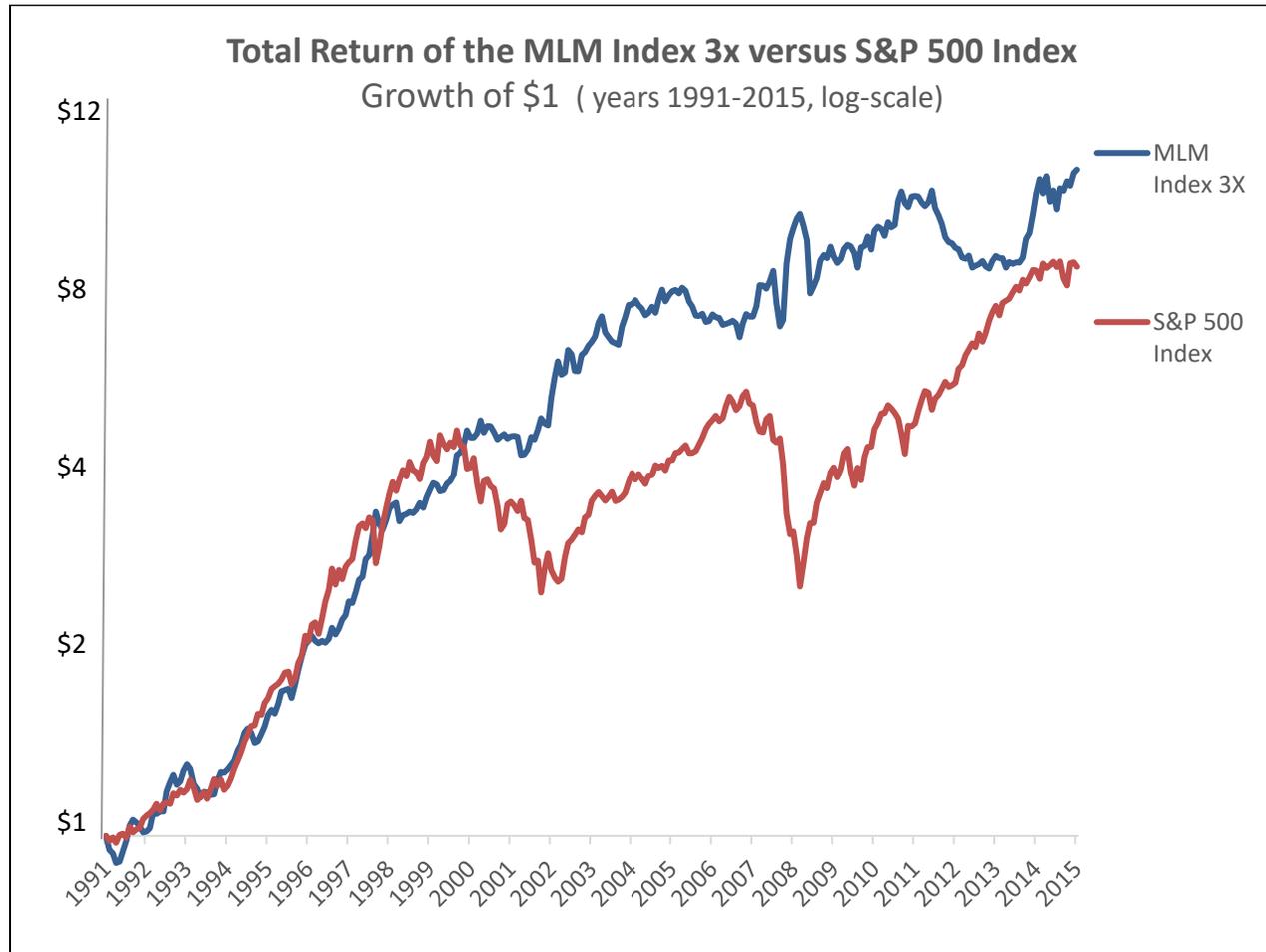
² The SG Trend Index tracks the 10 largest (by AUM) trend following strategies that are representative of trend followers in the managed futures space. Furthermore, these managers must be open to new investments, provide returns daily, and be highly correlated to their trend following peers.

While historically the SG Trend index has provided a positive return-to-risk of 0.44, systematic trend following is not a low risk strategy. It is for this reason that the strategy has the potential to offset risk emanating from other volatile markets, providing significant diversification to an overall portfolio. Historically, its returns have been negatively correlated to equities at -0.15, but more importantly, it tends to react strongly when equity markets are broadly and severely negative. Since tumbling equity markets tend to be very damaging for most institutional portfolios (typically institutions have a large exposure to equity risk), the benefit of this attribute of the strategy is extremely appealing.

Presenting the same information visually in the following chart, the return behavior of systematic trend following is virtually the “mirror image” of the equity market, particularly during the most desperate of equity market environments. However, returns to the strategy are episodic. The strategy can go for long periods of time in a sideways direction, oscillating between gains and losses. During these times, where market trends are less pronounced, investors in the strategy must be patient. It is important that investors understand this reality prior to making an investment.



Following is a longer history (in log-scale) of a simple 12-month systematic trend following strategy, as represented by the MLM 3x Index³. The graph shows that long-term returns to this simple trend following strategy have historically been similar to those of equities over time (particularly during the 1990's), but clearly returns have been offsetting in difficult equity market periods.



In conclusion, systematic trend following has generated an attractive return to risk profile, provided negative correlation to U.S. equities (particularly in down-trending equity markets), and is a persistent scalable strategy that can be implemented systematically and thus inexpensively. We expect that the strategy will continue to deliver this type of profile in the future.

³ The MLM Index™ trades a total of 22 futures contracts: 11 commodity, 6 currency and 5 global fixed incomes. Each of the 3 sub-baskets in the Index (commodities, currencies, global fixed income) is weighted by its relative historical volatility. Markets within each sub-basket are equally weighted. The MLM Index™ can take long or short positions in any of its 22 markets; there are no neutral positions.

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