

INDUSTRIALS

Table with columns: Last Sale, Move, Buy, Sell, 12 month High, Low, Sales, Div, P/E, Yield. Lists various industrial stocks like 360Cap, A1 Invest, AAC Ltd, etc.

THE SHORT CUT



with Roger Montgomery

In the long run, the best businesses can deliver exceptional returns to shareholders by steadily growing their earnings without the need for large infusions of new debt or equity capital.

This consistency of performance makes our life easy, and when we see an opportunity to buy one of these businesses at a discount to its underlying value, we tend to seize it. Of course, at times, such opportunities are scarce.

A more common occurrence is that the share price of an excellent company trades above any valuation we can reasonably ascribe. This is currently the case for online property listing company, REA Group Limited.

There is no doubting the quality of REA Group. As the leading online real estate business, it enjoys the benefits of network effects — a competitive advantage that has proven to be a resilient barrier to new entrants for a range of similar businesses — and it enjoys the attractive economics that go with a successful online model.

This has allowed REA to develop an impressive financial performance record over a number of years. Profit margins have trended upwards, EPS and cash flows have grown quickly, and the balance sheet shows an increasing net cash position.

At this point, REA looks almost unstoppable. As time proceeds, its strong market position could allow it to gently increase prices, further enhancing its already impressive economics and continuing the run of strong performance.

The problem, of course, is that REA's formidable position is now well understood by the market, and the share price has become equally formidable.

While we generally prefer to pay a fair price for a wonderful business than buy a fair business at a wonderful price, there are limits, and for us REA passed those limits some time ago.

It can be easy for investors to become more attached to a stock the more its share price rises, leading the investor to revise upwards their assessment of what the business may deliver in years ahead. This can be a painful mistake.

In these cases, we find automated

valuation tools can be very helpful. As part of our investment processes, we make extensive use of proprietary, automated valuation systems as well as Skafoff.com. These systems do not know the share price of the company they are evaluating, and remain brutally objective while human investors can get caught up in the mood of the times. As fund managers, we will often modify the valuation assumptions and put our own overlay on to the analysis, but the computer-generated valuations provide an objective benchmark, and any modification to this benchmark needs a coherent argument from the analyst as to why.

We used one of our valuation tools, without any analyst overlay, to compare REA's share price over time with its estimated intrinsic value. There are a couple of observations that can be drawn: REA'S intrinsic value has generally been rising at a steady clip over time; OUR valuation model tends to come out on the conservative side — estimated intrinsic value is generally lower than the share price; and DESPITE the very recent pullback, REA's share price has in the past year or two parted company with its estimated intrinsic value.

The first two of these points tend to be hallmarks of an excellent business. Rising intrinsic value and a well-supported share price are the norm rather than the exception.

The last point, however, is a clear warning sign. It is possible that our valuation does not give enough credit to REA, and it will deliver future earnings sufficient to justify the current share price. However, experience tells us that when heroic assumptions are needed to justify a valuation, the outcome is more likely to be disappointment. Even if REA continues to perform well, investors can still fare poorly if the share price becomes reacquainted with our estimates of intrinsic value.

For now, we will remain on the sidelines with this one. We may be here for some time.

Roger Montgomery is founder of Montgomery Investment Management.

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