



AlphaScreens: the quest for Quality

The holy grail for buy-and-hold investors is to find a business that is capable of generating a high return on its capital and sustaining it while reinvesting profits. This screen looks for shares that demonstrate these 'quality' characteristics and can deliver significant compounded returns over time

High-quality small-caps vs FTSE Small-Cap/Aim



High-quality large-caps vs FTSE All-Share



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Screen criteria:

Our Alpha Quality screen uses two key measures of quality: operating margins and return on equity. We are mindful that debt can flatter a company's return on equity, so we aim to reduce this risk from the screening results by introducing interest cover tests, to eliminate companies that are aggressively gearing up their balance sheet.

Monthly forward from Alpha Editor:

- There are still 18 companies in the FTSE All-Share index that pass all nine of our Alpha quality screen tests. These vary in size from giants such as **Unilever (ULVR)**, **Diageo (DGE)** and **Reckitt Benckiser (RB.)** through to smaller companies that reappear with perfect scores on our FTSE All Small Companies Index screen.
- Companies also highlighted by the Small Cap screen are MJ Gleeson (GLE), On the Beach (OTB) and Paypoint (PAY).
- Further questions investors should ask themselves when assessing results include how companies might fare in a recession as we are at a late stage of the economic cycle and some sectors, such as housebuilders that are well represented in the screen results could suffer. *IN*



The dream company

The holy grail for buy-and-hold investors is to find a business that is capable of generating high returns on its capital and is able to reinvest all its profits for decades to come, while maintaining those returns. The compounding effect of such an investment is what every long-term investor's dreams should be made of. A company making a consistent 15 per cent post-tax return on its equity and reinvesting all its profits would experience a near-30-fold (28.6 to be precise) growth in its equity base over 25 years, and after 50 years it would be a mind-boggling 1,084 times bigger than when it started. For a patient investor convinced that they have found such a situation, valuation should not act as a major impediment to a purchase.

Unfortunately, this kind of dream company is extremely rare and stock screens are too crude to provide the depth of analysis needed to provide confidence that a business may be the real deal. In particular, it is inevitable that some of the shares highlighted by our Alpha Quality screen will be cyclical companies that are enjoying a good run rather than companies that are well placed to sustain high returns through many business cycles to come. What our screen does do, however, is attempt to find pointers for companies that may have the potential to go some way to filling the dream brief. What's more, buying shares in companies that look attractive based on quality metrics can often prove a profitable strategy, even if many of the shares picked fall short of the buy-and-hold ideal.



Alpha Quality screening criteria

The screen uses two key measures of quality, which are operating margins and return on equity (RoE). The advantage of using RoE to measure the quality of a company is that it focuses on the returns that are ultimately of most significance to shareholders – after-tax earnings. However, RoE can be boosted by a company if it increases the amount of debt it carries. That means a high and rising RoE can sometimes simply reflect a reduction in the quality of the company's balance sheet and little improvement, or even a deterioration, in the quality of its operations. The screen attempts to counter this with its interest cover test, which should help it avoid companies with very aggressively 'geared' balance sheets. Focusing on operating margins also provides an assessment of quality at the operating level – ie before the impact of debt.

- An operating margin higher than the median average (mid-ranking) stock in each of the past three years (ie quality that shows some signs of persistence).
- A return on equity (RoE) higher than the median average (mid-ranking) stock in each of the past three years (ie again, quality that shows some signs of persistence).
- RoE higher than it was two years ago (ie quality is improving as well as persistent).
- Operating margin higher than it was two years ago (ie quality is improving as well as persistent).
- A dividend-and-debt adjusted price/earnings growth (PEG) ratio below the top fifth of stocks screened (ie stocks must not be too egregiously expensive for the growth on offer).
- A price/earnings (PE) ratio above the bottom 10 per cent of stocks screened and below the top 10 per cent (ie not a suspiciously cheap or dangerously expensive valuation).
- Interest cover of more than five (ie high RoE is not overly dependent on the use of debt).
- Forecast earnings growth for each of the next two financial years.
- Positive forecast free cash flow.

The Alpha Quality screen is conducted separately on constituents of the FTSE All-Share, FTSE All-Small and FTSE Aim All-Share indices, with the results from each screen reported in separate tables.

Not many stocks pass such a stringent list of criteria. The ones that pass all the tests are listed at the top of the table, followed by those failing one test, then those failing two tests as detailed in the 'Tests passed' column. All stocks must pass the test for three-year, higher-than-average RoE and margin to feature in the table. While the primary ranking of the stocks is based on the number of tests they pass, inside each of these groupings stocks are ordered according to their attractiveness based on operating margin and three-month share price momentum.

Stock screen methodology formulated and explained by Algy Hall



		Market		Forward		FY EPS	FY EPS	3-month	Net cash/		ests passed	Test
Name	TIDM	cap	Price	NTM PE	DY	Grth +1	Grth +2	momentum	debt(-)	Currency	(out of 9)	faile
RELX	LSE:REL	£32,730m	1,667p	19	2.4%	4.6%	7.7%	10.6%	-6,274m	GBP	9	n
Persimmon	LSE:PSN	£7,579m	2,395p	9	9.8%	11.2%	0.7%	9.5%	1,155m	GBP	9	n
Renishaw	LSE:RSW	£3,095m	4,252p	23	1.4%	5.7%	8.9%	10.7%	104m	GBP	9	n
Redrow	LSE:RDW	£2,083m	577p	6	4.9%	5.8%	5.6%	12.3%	63m	GBP	9	n
Polypipe	LSE:PLP	£770m	385p	13	2.9%	4.6%	9.2%	21.2%	-147m	GBP	9	n
MJ Gleeson	LSE:GLE	£404m	740p	12	4.3%	7.7%	10.2%	8.6%	41m	GBP	9	n
Halma	LSE:HLMA	£5,355m	1,413p	27	1.0%	12.7%	7.9%	8.9%	-195m	GBP	9	n
Barratt Developments	LSE:BDEV	£5,421m	535p	8	8.2%	2.9%	2.2%	8.1%	791m	GBP	9	n
Moneysupermarket.com	LSE:MONY	£1,588m	296p	17	3.6%	1.0%	8.0%	3.2%	24m	GBP	9	n
On the Beach	LSE:OTB	£570m	435p	18	0.8%	14.8%	18.0%	3.4%	86m	GBP	9	n
Diageo	LSE:DGE	£66,448m	2,754p	21	2.4%	6.4%	7.6%	2.2%	-9 , 228m	GBP	9	n
Ashtead	LSE:AHT	£9,281m	1 , 953p	10	1.7%	36.2%	10.6%	2.4%	-3,612m	GBP	9	n
Domino's Pizza	LSE:DOM	£1,295m	278p	16	3.2%	3.8%	9.6%	4.3%	-196m	GBP	9	n
Spirax-Sarco Engineering	LSE:SPX	£4,713m	6,405p	25	1.4%	13.7%	5.7%	2.1%	-373m	GBP	9	n
Diploma	LSE:DPLM	£1,449m	1,280p	21	2.0%	9.8%	4.4%	1.0%	36m	GBP	9	n
Unilever	LSE:ULVR	£106,057m	4,058p	19	3.2%	2.5%	8.6%	-1.5%	-24,764m	EUR	9	n
PayPoint	LSE:PAY	£567m	840p	13	9.9%	1.3%	4.9%	-3.9%	33m	GBP	9	n
Reckitt Benckiser	LSE:RB.	£42,294m	5,978p	17	2.7%	3.4%	8.6%	-11.0%	-10,769m	GBP	9	n
Rightmove	LSE:RMV	£4,223m	475p	25	1.2%	10.8%	8.5%	12.8%	14m	GBP	8	/RoE grth
Polymetal International	LSE:POLY	£3,981m	848p	11	4.3%	1.3%	22.6%	14.7%	-1,652m	USD	8	/RoE grth
Centamin	LSE:CEY	£1,327m	115p	17	8.4%	-24.0%	25.0%	10.0%	254m	USD	8	/Fwd EPS grth
Experian	LSE:EXPN	£17,511m	1,944p	24	1.8%	2.7%	11.7%	9.2%	-3,430m	USD	8	/Marg grth
Countryside Properties	LSE:CSP	£1,456m	324p	8	3.3%	14.3%	10.2%	15.4%	45m	GBP	8	/RoE grth
Sirius Real Estate	LSE:SRE	£602m	59p	12	4.9%	50.1%	-3.3%	4.5%	-323m	EUR	8	/Fwd EPS grth
Taylor Wimpey	LSE:TW.	£5,459m	167p	8	9.3%	5.2%	-2.4%	8.4%	496m	GBP	8	/Fwd EPS grth
Bellway	LSE:BWY	£3,641m	2,962p	7	4.8%	3.3%	3.7%	6.4%	99m	GBP	8	/RoE grth
Burberry	LSE:BRBY	£7,302m	1,788p	21	2.3%	-0.1%	5.3%	7.2%	647m	GBP	8	/Fwd EPS grth
Croda International	LSE:CRDA	£6,375m	4,883p	25	1.7%	7.4%	8.1%	4.1%	-393m	GBP	8	
												/RoE grth
The Unite Group	LSE:UTG	£2,298m	872p	24	2.6%	14.8%	11.8%	1.9%	-412m	GBP	8	/RoE grth
Games Workshop	LSE:GAW	£1,012m	3,115p	18	4.2%	-4.9%	4.3%	0.7%	25m	GBP	8	/Fwd EPS grth
Segro	LSE:SGRO	£6,387m	631p	27	2.7%	12.5%	8.4%	-1.2%	-2,115m	GBP	8	/Int Cov
IMI	LSE:IMI	£2,600m	959p	13	4.1%	10.2%	4.0%	2.8%	-449m	GBP	8	/Marg grth
HomeServe	LSE:HSV	£3,004m	905p	23	2.1%	8.8%	10.0%	1.0%	-292m	GBP	8	/RoE grth
Mondi	LSE:MNDI	£8,777m	1,814p	11	3.0%	20.5%	2.9%	0.5%	-2 , 457m	EUR	8	/RoE grth
FDM Group	LSE:FDM	£915m	845p	24	3.4%	8.6%	7.2%	-7.8%	30m	GBP	8	/Int Cov
British American Tobacco.		£58,138m	2,542p	8	7.7%	2.9%	8.9%	-22.0%	-46 , 199m	GBP	8	/PI
Photo-Me International	LSE:PHTM	£351m	93p	10	9.1%	-6.6%	9.1%	-12.8%	31m	GBP	8	/Fwd EPS grth
XP Power	LSE:XPP	£392m	2 , 050p	12	3.8%	13.9%	5.9%	-22.7%	-47m	GBP	8	/FCI
The Sage Group	LSE:SGE	£6,868m	633p	21	2.6%	-7.2%	8.9%	14.9%	-649m	GBP	7	/PEG/Fwd EPS grth
Wizz Air	LSE:WIZZ	£2,197m	3 , 020p	14	-	4.5%	21.8%	30.1%	1,125m	EUR	7	/RoE grth/FC
Howden Joinery	LSE:HWDN	£3,058m	502p	16	2.2%	6.9%	7.2%	12.6%	213m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/Int Co
AG Barr	LSE:BAG	£908m	803p	25	1.9%	3.5%	5.0%	6.0%	4m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/Int Co
Pennon	LSE:PNN	£3,207m	764p	14	5.2%	5.8%	7.8%	2.9%	-3,242m	GBP	7	/FCF/Int Co
Card Factory	LSE:CARD	£602m	176p	10	8.1%	-8.3%	-0.4%	-1.7%	-160m	GBP	7	/PEG/Fwd EPS grtl
Victrex	LSE:VCT	£2,090m	2,430p	19	5.9%	-0.1%	7.0%	-5.4%	144m	GBP	7	/Fwd EPS grth/Int Co
Dairy Crest	LSE:DCG	£702m	454p	12	5.0%	-2.9%	5.9%	-2.3%	-234m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/Fwd EPS grth
Tarsus	LSE:TRS	£308m	252p	16	4.0%	-43.0%	73.9%	-8.2%	-95m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/Fwd EPS grth
NEXT	LSE:NXT	£6,349m	4,746p	11	3.3%	4.7%	2.5%	-7.7%	-1,182m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/Marg grth

Name	TIDM	Market	Price	Forward NTM PE	DY	FY EPS Grth +1	FY EPS Grth +2	3-month momentum	Net cash/ debt(-)	_	ests passed (out of 9)	Test faile
MJ Gleeson	LSE:GLE	£404m	740p	12	4.3%	7.7%	10.2%	8.6%	41m	Currency GBP	9	nane
On the Beach	LSE:OTB	£570m	435p	18	0.8%	14.8%	18.0%	3.4%	86m	GBP	9	na
PayPoint	LSE:PAY	£567m	840p	13	9.9%	1.3%	4.9%	-3.9%	33m	GBP	9	na
Sirius Real Estate	LSE:SRE	£602m	59p	12	4.9%	50.1%	-3.3%	4.5%	-323m	EUR	8	/Fwd EPS grth
Photo-Me International	LSE:PHTM	£351m	93p	10	9.1%	-6.6%	9.1%	-12.8%	31m	GBP	8	/Fwd EPS grth
XP Power	LSE:XPP	£392m	2,050p	12	3.8%	13.9%	5.9%	-22.7%	-47m	GBP	8	/FCF
Picton Property Income	LSE:PCTN	£460m	85p	20	4.1%	3.1%	1.8%	0.2%	-173m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/Int Cov
Treatt	LSE:TET	£246m	420p	23	1.2%	4.5%	5.0%	1.8%	10m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/FCF
Henry Boot	LSE:BOOT	£336m	253p	9	3.2%	-13.8%	2.6%	-1.9%	-26m	GBP	7	/PEG/Fwd EPS grth
Tarsus	LSE:TRS	£308m	252p	16	4.0%	-43.0%	73.9%	-8.2%	-95m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/Fwd EPS grth
Vp	LSE:VP.	£403m	1,020p	10	2.5%	17.7%	5.8%	-7.1%	-188m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/FCF



		Market		Forward		FY EPS	FY EPS	3-month	Net cash/		ests passed	Test
Name	TIDM	cap		NTM PE	DY	Grth +1	Grth +2	momentum	debt(-)	Currency	(out of 9)	faile
Bioventix	AIM:BVXP	£156m	3,040p	27	3.8%	4.4%	12.0%	7.5%	7m	GBP	9	n
D4t4 Solutions	AIM:D4T4	£78m	205p	17	1.2%	9.0%	9.9%	8.0%	12m	GBP	9	n
Advanced Medical Solutions	AIM:AMS	£621m	291p	28	0.4%	7.5%	7.2%	0.7%	71m	GBP	9	n
Johnson Service	AIM:JSG	£479m	131p	14	2.1%	6.3%	6.6%	5.8%	-91m	GBP	9	n
Somero Enterprises	AIM:SOM	£189m	335p	11	3.6%	27.7%	3.7%	-3.1%	21m	USD	9	n
Belvoir Lettings	AIM:BLV	£32m	92p	8	7.7%	2.7%	13.2%	-7.4%	-4m	GBP	9	n
Redde	AIM:REDD	£531m	173p	13	6.7%	10.4%	5.5%	-4.3%	-8m	GBP	9	n
Elecosoft	AIM:ELCO	£55m	69p	19	0.9%	44.0%	14.8%	-12.8%	3m	GBP	9	n
Taptica International	AIM:TAP	£101m	148p	4	4.2%	12.7%	5.0%	-57.0%	42m	USD	9	n
ECO Animal Health	AIM:EAH	£319m	475p	20	1.9%	22.6%	7.4%	22.1%	25m	GBP	8	/Int Cov
Central Asia Metals	AIM:CAML	£404m	236p	8	7.0%	43.8%	-7.1%	9.2%	-128m	USD	8	/Fwd EPS grth
Tristel	AIM:TSTL	£121m	273p	27	1.7%	39.2%	12.0%	20.5%	7m	GBP	8	/Int Cov
James Halstead	AIM:JHD	£947m	455p	24	3.0%	7.6%	2.7%	14.5%	50m	GBP	8	/RoE grth
Arcontech	AIM:ARC	£18m	140p	22	0.9%	54.8%	3.4%	8.9%	3m	GBP	8	/Int Cov
Oxford Metrics	AIM:OMG	£96m	77p	21	1.9%	2.5%	30.9%	11.3%	12m	GBP	8	/RoE grth
Tracsis	AIM:TRCS	£171m	603p	23	0.3%	3.3%	4.8%	7.0%	22m	GBP	8	/PEG
Telford Homes	AIM:TEF	£251m	334p	7	5.1%	3.6%	4.1%	8.9%	-113m	GBP	8	/FCF
Churchill China	AIM:CHH	£147m	1,340p	20	1.8%	20.4%	3.4%	5.4%	14m	GBP	8	/Int Cov
IG Design	AIM:IGR	£459m	586p	22	1.1%	23.8%	13.6%	12.3%	-100m	GBP	8	/FCF
dotdigital	AIM:DOTD	£244m	82p	22	0.8%	19.7%	11.7%	0.2%	15m	GBP	8	/Int Cov
Portmeirion	AIM:PMP	£115m	1,075p	15	3.2%	11.9%	5.8%	4.4%	-1m	GBP	8	/RoE grth
Fevertree Drinks	AIM:FEVR	£3,142m	2,706p	50	0.4%	26.1%	13.7%	-2.8%	56m	GBP	8	/PE
Nexus Infrastructure	AIM:NEXS	£73m	193p	9	3.4%	15.1%	12.7%	6.4%	19m	GBP	8	/RoE grth
AdEPT Telecom	AIM:ADT	£85m	360p	12	2.7%	10.9%	4.0%	0.0%	-31m	GBP	8	/Int Cov
RWS Holdings	AIM:RWS	£1,280m	468p	23	1.6%	17.9%	6.6%	-2.9%	-65m	GBP	8	/RoE grth
Gamma Communications	AIM:GAMA	£733m	780p	27	1.1%	19.0%	16.8%	-1.7%	31m	GBP	8	/RoE grth
The Property Franchise Group	AIM:TPFG	£31m	122p	9	6.2%	9.4%	2.7%	-11.6%	1m	GBP	8	/RoE grth
iomart	AIM:IOM	£374m	345p	17	2.9%	7.0%	7.8%	-8.2%	-33m	GBP	8	/RoE grth
Quixant	AIM:QXT	£231m	348p	17	0.7%	4.2%	14.6%	-9.4%	3m	USD	8	/RoE grth
Fulcrum Utility Services	AIM:FCRM	£99m	45p	10	4.7%	15.3%	0.1%	-10.3%	10m	GBP	8	/RoE grth
Dewhurst	AIM:DWHT	£56m	885p	12	1.4%	37.2%	2.2%	-8.2%	9m	GBP	8	/RoE grth
Inspired Energy	AIM:INSE	£119m	17p	10	3.3%	6.0%	7.4%	-20.6%	-20m	GBP	8	/RoE grth
Scapa	AIM:SCPA	£503m	326p	16	0.7%	-0.4%	21.0%	-13.7%	-6m	GBP	8	/Fwd EPS grth
Nichols	AIM:NICL	£577m	1,565p	22	2.1%	3.2%	4.1%	18.0%	37m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/Int Cov
AB Dynamics	AIM:ABDP	£291m	1,480p	31	0.2%	26.6%	22.0%	17.9%	16m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/Int Cov
SafeCharge International	AIM:SCH	£449m	295p	20	4.4%	7.4%	12.1%	9.7%	86m	USD	7	/RoE grth/Int Cov
Andrews Sykes	AIM:ASY	£243m	575p	-	4.1%	-		4.7%	17m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/Fwd EPS grth
Shoe Zone	AIM:SHOE	£110m	221p	13	5.2%	-7.5%	0.4%	21.6%	16m	GBP	7	/PEG/Fwd EPS grth
Abcam	AIM:ABC	£2,528m	1,234p	37	1.0%	2.9%	7.8%	0.9%	90m	GBP	7	/PEG/Int Cov
The Character Group	AIM:CCT	£112m	535p	11	4.5%	7.3%	10.2%	5.9%	16m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/Marg grth
Patisserie Holdings	AIM:CAKE	£446m	0р	22	0.8%	15.2%	8.2%	0.0%	29m	GBP	7	/PEG/RoE grth
Gateley	AIM:GTLY	£163m	147p	12	4.8%	23.8%	6.4%	0.2%	-8m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/Marg grth
Hotel Chocolat	AIM:HOTC	£299m	265p	28	0.8%	6.9%	18.3%	2.3%	0m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/FCF
Judges Scientific	AIM:JDG	£159m	2,560p	17	1.3%	17.4%	-10.4%	1.1%	-2m	GBP	7	/PEG/Fwd EPS grth
Zytronic	AIM:ZYT	£60m	373p	15	6.1%	12.0%	1.7%	-3.0%	15m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/Marg grth
Dart	AIM:DTG	£1,230m	827p	9	0.9%	51.8%	-14.4%	-1.1%	460m	GBP	7	/Fwd EPS grth/FCF
FW Thorpe	AIM:TFW	£298m	257p	-	2.1%	J1.0 /0	-14.470	-8.1%	400m	GBP	7	/PEG/Fwd EPS grth
Dewhurst	AIM:TFW AIM:DWHA		525p	-	2.1 /0	-		-4.5%	9m	GBP	7	
Craneware	AIM:CRW	£693m	2,595p	49	1.0%	15.4%	17.0%	-4.3%		USD	7	/ROE gitti/FWd EF3 gitt /Int Cov/PE
						13.4%	17.0%		53m			
Prime People	AIM:PRP	£9m	74p	1.6	6.8%	0.20/	12.40/	-10.8%	2m	GBP	7	/Fwd EPS grth/Int Cov
Scientific Digital Imaging	AIM:SDI	£30m	34p	14	2.50/	-0.2%	12.1%	-16.1%	1m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/Fwd EPS grth
Anpario	AIM:ANP	£84m	361p	20	2.5%	13.0%	10.3%	-15.6%	13m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/Int Co
boohoo	AIM:BOO	£2,128m	183p	40	-	26.3%	20.5%	-16.4%	156m	GBP	7	/RoE grth/PE
Hunters Property	AIM:HUNT	£12m	37p	-	5.9%	-	-	-19.4%	-3m	GBP	7	, , ,
ULS Technology Source: S&P CapitallQ, 21 January 2019	AIM:ULS	£45m	70p	12	3.4%	-16.7%	16.6%	-36.9%	-3m	GBP	7	/PEG/Fwd EPS grth



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