

Rise and Fall

How to trade fallen angels

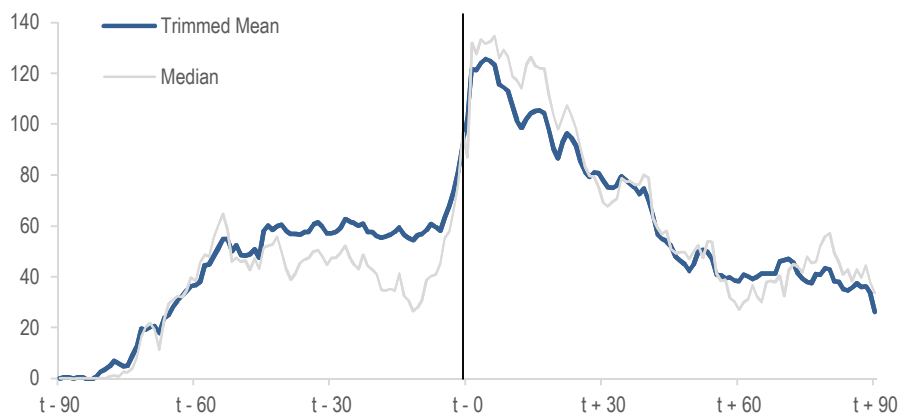
- Fallen angels typically widen in the run-up to being downgraded, and then rally after moving to high yield.
- We recommend that investors buy fallen angels within a few days of the downgrade date, which has historically produced an average return of 4.5% over the next 90 days.
- We find that it is best to buy bonds whose spreads have widened by more than 50% after adjusting for the market beta. This has been successful 63 out of 69 times.

In *Fall from Grace, 11th October 2018*, we warned that €100 - 120bn of euro corporate bonds could be downgraded from investment grade to high yield in the next recession. For a mandate constrained investor who is forced to sell fallen angels, we estimated that this could lead to a portfolio credit loss of approximately 108bp.

However, not all investors are forced to sell on downgrade. Many investment grade asset managers are able to allocate 5 - 10% of their portfolio to lower-rated bonds. Insurers will have to hold more capital against sub-investment grade debt. That begs the question: how should less constrained investors trade fallen angels?

Unsurprisingly, the obvious (and not very helpful) answer is: “sell early”. On average, fallen angels widen by 93bp over the three months prior to downgrade, with around two-fifths of this coming in the two weeks preceding the rating change. On the day of the downgrade event, they then widen by a further 10bp on average, followed by an additional 19bp on the next day (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Fallen Angel Spread Moves Before and After Downgrade



Source: J.P. Morgan, Bloomberg, Markit Group. Mean of 25 - 75th percentile.

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In this note, we look at the performance of approximately 160 European fallen angel senior bonds from 50 issuers since 2010. We define a fallen angel as a bond migrating from the iBoxx EUR Corporates to the iBoxx EUR High Yield benchmark.

In all charts and data, we define the downgrade date ($t = 0$) as the day on which the average rating on the bond moved to high yield, in accordance with the methodologies for the iBoxx and ICE BAML indices.

The second best answer, however, is to wait until the dust has settled. Based on our analysis, **fallen angels typically rally after moving to high yield**, with spreads tightening by 100bp from the peak on average in the following three months.

What explains this? We think that the early widening is probably fundamentally driven, resulting from either single-name credit deterioration or stress within the sector. It is also likely that at least one rating agency takes the credit rating down to high yield within this period, even though the average is still investment grade, and the name may also be on negative watch.

In our view, investors then begin to anticipate the name falling out of the investment grade indices, potentially due to another sudden negative headline or earnings release. As a result, mandate constrained investors sell down their remaining positions, with the risk being transferred to a combination of dealers, hedge funds and some early high yield funds. This selling appears to peak in the few days immediately before and after the rating change.

However, after a week or so, the selling starts to dry up. Gradually, the risk begins to move out of liquidity providers and into more high yield funds and other long-term holders who are comfortable buying at lower prices. As a result, spreads slowly begin to retrace from the wides. While not every case follows this pattern exactly, it has been broadly followed many times, such as Anglo American in 2016 and Teva in 2017 (Figure 2 and Figure 3).

In our view, existing holders of the bond who are unable to cut their position early should therefore wait until at least 50 days after the downgrade before selling. On average, we find that most of the retracement has already taken place within this timeframe.

Figure 2: AALLN 1.5% '20 Price, pts



Source: J.P. Morgan, Bloomberg. Dotted line is downgrade date.

Figure 3: TEVA 0.375% '20 Price, pts



Source: J.P. Morgan, Bloomberg. Dotted line is downgrade date.

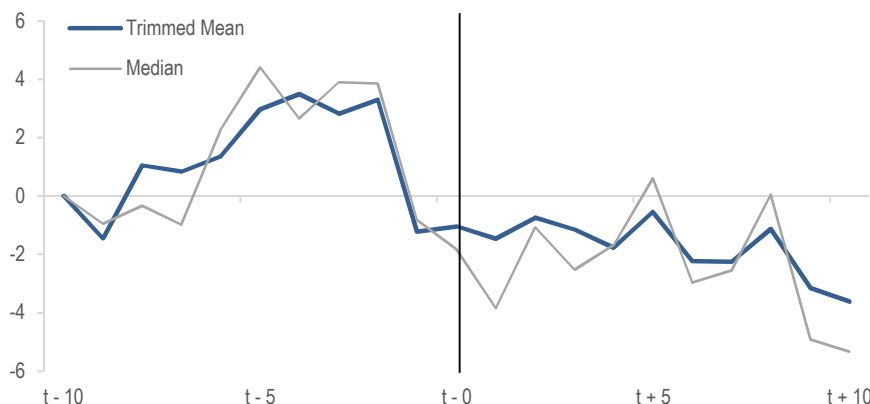
Leaving without saying “goodbye”

Notably, the bonds will not actually leave the investment grade indices until the end of the month that they are downgraded¹, between 3 to 25 business days later, by which time many of them have already started rallying. We therefore find little evidence that the actual transition from the investment grade to the high yield index

¹ Or the following month if the downgrade is within two business days of the end of the month under the iBoxx rules, or three business days under the ICE BAML rules.

has any additional negative impact on pricing (Figure 4). This suggests that investors who need – or want – to sell tend to do so on the ratings change event, and not when the bond leaves the index.

Figure 4: Fallen Angel Spread Moves Before and After Leaving the Index



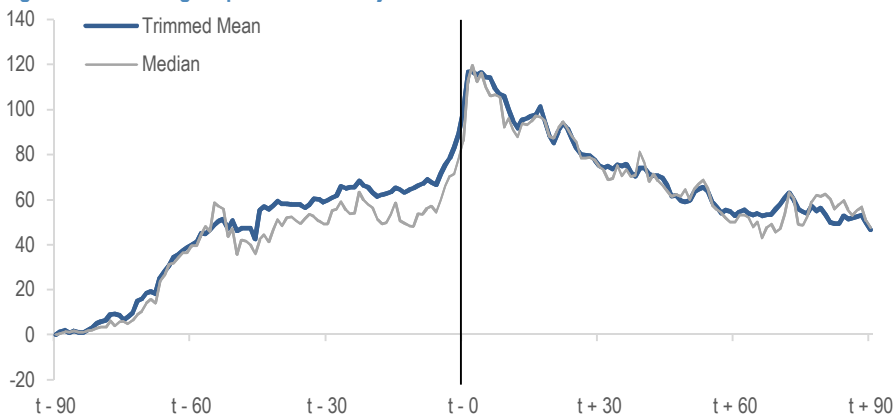
Source: J.P. Morgan, Bloomberg, Markit Group. T=0 is the last day the bond is in the investment grade index.

Is it all just the market?

One potential theory for the ‘rise and fall’ pattern of fallen angel spreads is that it is being driven by market cycles. It could be argued that rating agencies tend to downgrade bonds during periods of broad credit stress when the market as a whole is trending wider, but that volatility episodes tend to be short-lived and so, naturally, the fallen angel bonds tend to retrace their weakness.

If we adjust the spread moves for the market beta of each bond, we do find some evidence for this (Figure 5). While the underperformance on the move wider looks very similar, the retracement is more limited. Rather than reversing part of the early ‘credit deterioration’ related underperformance, only the ‘index technical’ sell-off in the few days immediately surrounding the downgrade event is retraced. The remainder of the rally is driven by the broader market.

Figure 5: Fallen Angel Spread Moves Adjusted for Market Beta

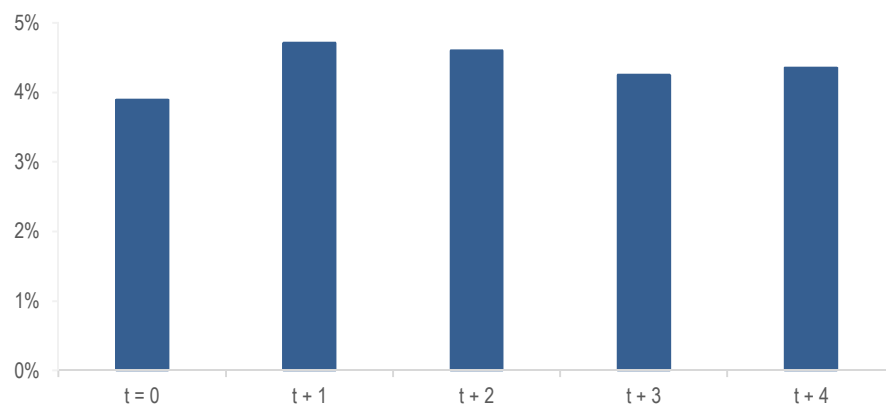


Source: J.P. Morgan, Bloomberg, Markit Group. Mean of 25 – 75th percentile.

An opportunity in every problem

Given the spread moves, we find that it is very attractive to buy fallen angels within a few days of the downgrade date. **Historically, this has generated an excess return of approximately 4.5% on average over the next ninety days**, with a positive return 75% of the time, or for 121 out of 161 bonds (Figure 6). Effectively, we think that this can be considered as the compensation for facilitating the transfer of risk out of investment grade holders and into high yield funds.

Figure 6: Average 90 Day Return for Buying Fallen Angels, % by purchase date

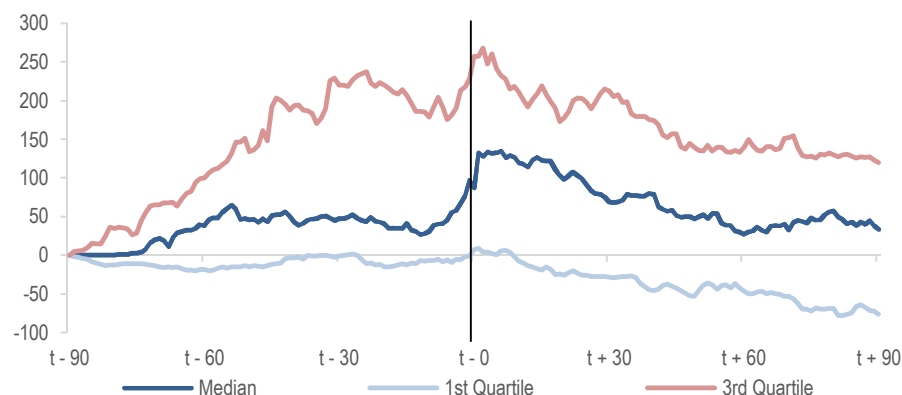


Source: J.P. Morgan, Bloomberg, Markit Group.

The harder you fall, the higher you bounce

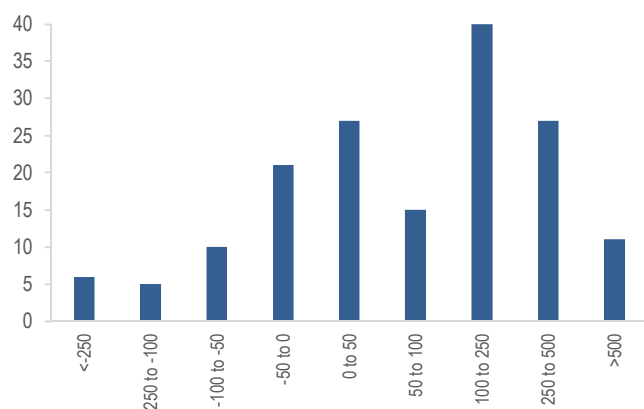
While it is useful to look at the averages, not every fallen angel follows the same pattern. In some cases, the downgrade is widely expected in advance, while in others the rating change can come as a total surprise to the market. Indeed, if we look at the dispersion of spread moves for fallen angels, it is extremely wide: one quarter of bonds widen by more than 200bp before falling into high yield, while another quarter do not widen at all (Figure 7, Figure 8 and Figure 9).

Figure 7: Fallen Angel Spread Moves, bp 1st – 3rd quartile range



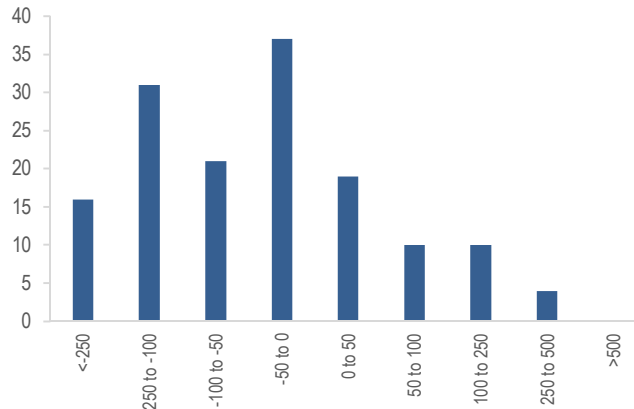
Source: J.P. Morgan, Bloomberg, Markit Group.

Figure 8: Distribution of Spread Moves Before Downgrade, # bonds



Source: J.P. Morgan, Bloomberg, Markit Group. $t - 90$ to $t - 1$ inclusive.

Figure 9: Distribution of Spread Moves After Downgrade, # bonds



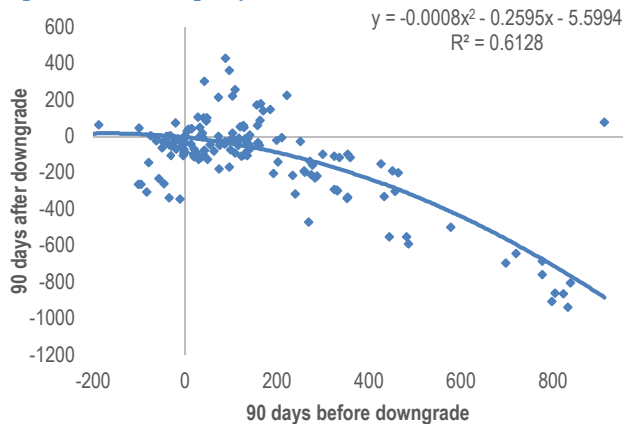
Source: J.P. Morgan, Bloomberg, Markit Group. $t = 0$ to $t + 90$ inclusive.

If we plot moves for individual bonds in the three months before and after being downgraded to high yield, we find a strong relationship between the size of the initial widening and the size of the following retracement (Figure 10). Further, the line of best fit is quadratic, which suggests that **bonds which see the largest falls tend to see the biggest retracement in percentage terms**. Indeed, of the 37 bonds which widened by more than 250bp before downgrade, 36 of them rallied in the three months afterward by an average of 380bp. The exception was Steinhoff, which eventually moved into default.

However, we find only limited evidence that ‘surprise’ downgrades, where the bond tightens in the ninety days before the rating change, see a much greater volume of forced selling. In fact, many of these actually continue to rally over the next three months, although most of them do sell off temporarily in the three days after being downgraded (Figure 11). In our view, this shows that investors’ perception of credit quality can often trump the index technicals.

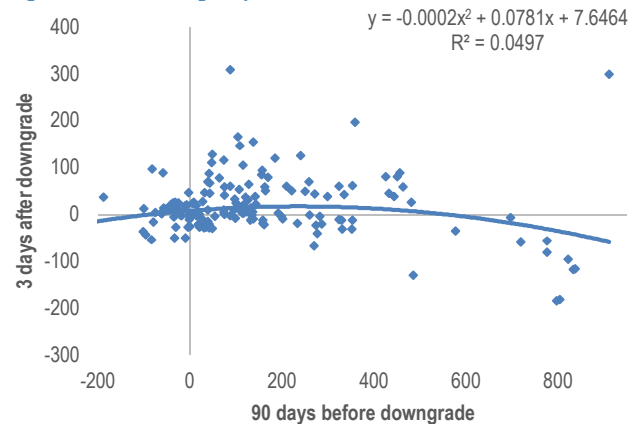
Instead, it is bonds which have widened by 0 – 200bp prior to downgrade which tend to perform the worst afterward, both in the immediate aftermath and over the next few months. This category tended to see the biggest immediate three day reaction to the downgrade, and in a number of individual cases they were still trading wider three months later.

Figure 10: Fallen Angel Spread Move, 90d before vs 90d after



Source: J.P. Morgan, Bloomberg, Markit Group. $t = 0$ to $t + 90$ inclusive.

Figure 11: Fallen Angel Spread Move, 90d before vs 3d after



Source: J.P. Morgan, Bloomberg, Markit Group. $t = 0$ to $t + 2$ inclusive.

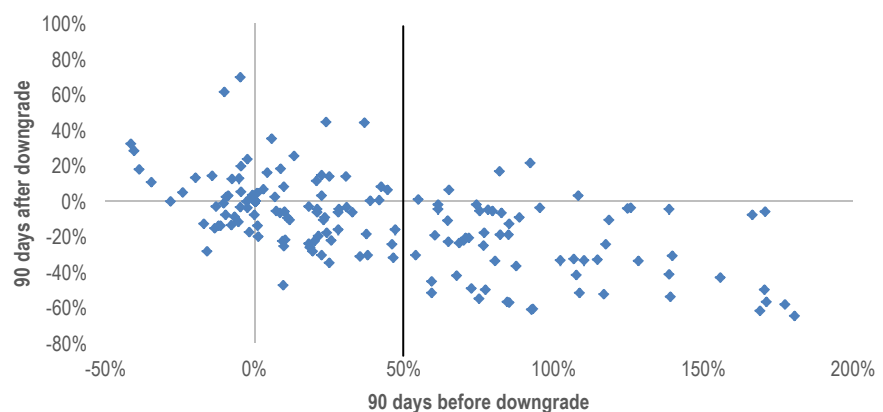
Trading rules of thumb

While the simple strategy of buying fallen angels within a few days of downgrade generates good credit returns, it is worth asking whether there are any strategies which are even more effective. In our view, there is a good rule of thumb: **buy fallen angels whose spreads have widened by more than 50% over the previous three months after adjusting for the market beta.**

By this, we mean subtracting the percentage change in market spreads over the previous three months from the percentage change in the fallen angel spread. So, for example, if the fallen angel widens by 100%, and the market has only widened by 20%, we would say that the market adjusted spread widening is 80%, and a buy signal has been triggered.

This has generated a historical excess return of 7.6% on average, with a positive return 88% of the time, for 63 out of 69 bonds.

Figure 12: % Spread Change Adjusted for Market Beta, 90d before vs 90d after (excl. $t = 0$)



Source: J.P. Morgan, Bloomberg, Markit Group. Dotted line is trade signal.

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