
BREAKING DOWN LEGAL RANKINGS

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Legal rankings have long been seen as an identifier of a firm's or individual's success in their field. But with new directories and publications popping up left, right, and centre it can be difficult to determine their legitimacy. However, with a little guidance and a rudimentary understanding of marketing tactics, which I will provide below, firms of all sizes can utilize the rankings and awards system to help put themselves in good stead for attracting prospective clients.

Legal rankings are compiled at different levels: global, regional, and national. All three have their relevance and to be seen as a well-rounded

firm, securing a place at each level is certainly encouraged. At first glance, you might ask: "Who should I write to?". Unfortunately, the answer is not quite as simple as naming a publication as the be all and end all. Rather, the choices a firm makes may depend on factors such as their existing reputation, areas of law they practice, or breadth of reach.

Firms should be cautious when engaging with some lesser-known publications. As a general rule of thumb avoid the notorious pay-to-play publications. Essentially, these publications will rank you if you pay an initial fee or take out an advert in their upcoming magazine. The

larger the advert, the higher the rank. This is not far off buying your own trophy and etching “No. 1 Lawyer” on the side. Receiving an email out of nowhere stating “congratulations, you’ve been chosen as...” is a tell-tale sign that once you wade through their preamble of why you should participate, you will be hit with “...for the special price of \$5000”, which has become a typical tactic by many online businesses in various sectors in the current click bait era.

Genuine awards and rankings, however, are created through in-depth research by each directory, with a slight variation on how each one operates. Many of the main players will implement a three-stage process, beginning with providing each firm with a submission form to learn more about their practice and biggest wins over the past twelve months. Large firms with offices in multiple jurisdictions are often encouraged to make a submission for each jurisdiction they operate in so they can be measured fairly against their peers with greater accuracy. Once submissions have been made, interviews with partners are often carried out by a representative from the publication, where they will discuss topics such as the firm’s most important cases from the past year, any recent developments in their area of law and jurisdiction. Firms may be asked to give their opinion on other firms and individual lawyers. Finally, a sample of each firm’s clients are contacted to provide their view on how the firm has performed over the past year.

The current process typically works well as it gives each firm an opportunity to represent themselves in the best possible manner and then this can be backed up (or perhaps in rare cases discredited!) by other major players in the legal sphere. Considering a lot of time and effort goes into this process, the genuine publications give a solid account on the current state of the legal industry and many of the top law firms tend to

agree with the final results. With that said, there certainly are arguments to support both the benefits and detriments to participating in multiple awards each year.

Perhaps the most obvious benefit to any award is the recognition by an esteemed publication that serves as confirmation of quality work by either a firm or an individual. When the likes of Chambers or The Legal 500 - both of which are well-known throughout the legal world - consistently rank a firm in the top tier, both current and prospective clients will see that, at the very least, as a good place to start when deciding who should represent their legal affairs. People look for reviews when making many different types of decisions, from recommendations for contracting work on their homes or health care providers, all the way through to more trivial matters like choosing movies based on Oscar nominations, or eating at Michelin-star restaurants. Regardless of the subject, reviews and awards have a positive impact that should not be scoffed at, and any business-savvy person will use them to their advantage.

Smaller firms in particular can reap the benefits of participation as the rankings can level the playing field since publications recognise how well smaller firms perform under the dominance of the industry giants. The expectations are much higher for larger firms, meaning they must also compete with their own previous submissions. In this sense, rankings are an effective way of showing how smaller or specialist firms can be the way to go in certain matters, whilst also giving rise to the opportunity for a firm to expand its client base. Furthermore, a top ranking does not just simply show that a firm has excelled over the past twelve months. It can be relied on for at least the next year to show existing clients why they should continue to engage a law firm and why

prospective clients should look to secure their services.

Conversely, it is important for firms to determine whether those benefits outweigh the costs by considering such factors as the financial implications, time spent and labour costs. Completing a submission is extremely time-consuming as a lot of information needs to be gathered, sorted, and displayed in a way that will make your firm stand out. To add to this, there are also often multiple people involved that must make time for this in their already tightly packed schedule. As most submissions partly make their decisions based on client testimonials, firm's must carefully select which clients to put forward and with smaller firms in particular, this could give a sense of unease as they may not want to appear bothersome to their top clientele. Yet ultimately the biggest factor comes down to whether or not a firm is given recognition for their efforts - being overlooked can be disheartening and considered a waste of time that could have been used to promote the firm in more beneficial ways.

Whilst the current rankings system is a solid indication of those at the top of the legal field and should certainly be utilised by law firms at the national, regional, and global levels, there is always room for improvement. One concern in particular is that individual lawyer rankings should have more clearly defined criteria to help certain lawyers gain the recognition they deserve. The basis of the firm rankings are

straightforward, as detailed above. But when it comes to individual awards we can often be left scratching our heads wondering why some lawyers are continuously overlooked despite managing an impressive portfolio of clients, achieving big wins, and securing prominent clients. In this respect it would help to know what these individuals need to focus on to gain the recognition they deserve.

Where the legal ranking publications tend to fall short is in analysts' ability to fully explore the intricacies of each assignment that law firms present. Publications could achieve a far more critical analysis by delving into how each firm handles complicated assignments. For example, one firm may claim that they "were involved in a multi-billion-dollar project". This may be true to an extent, but may not quite the whole picture. This kind of mega project would likely cover multiple areas of law but this particular firm may represent only a small fraction of the work, say handling visas for expats. It would be true that this firm was involved in a mega project at the same time as they were not part of the core assignments that made it successful. So when publications interview the client who assigned visa assignments to this firm and they are happy with the results, this firm will get a good review that doesn't necessarily reflect reality. If analysts have a greater understanding of how these deals work, they will be better able to see the true value of firms, and both big and small firms will have an equal chance to be listed.

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