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Developing Your In-House Rankings Program

RankingsForLawyers®

RankingsForAccountants™

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There are more than 1.3 million licensed lawyers and 650,000 licensed CPAs in the United States today. That is a lot of competition. You know your firm is the best, but how do you let other people know? Simply going out and telling people you're the best doesn't work. You have to show how great you are, especially relative to your competition. That is where rankings, lists and awards come in.

There are thousands of legitimate U.S. and international rankings, lists and awards that recognize lawyers and accountants — but you don't have to submit to each one. Instead, optimize your time and effort by selecting the top rankings that align the most closely with your business development goals. This is the beginning of your firm's ranking program (more on that below).

Developing a rankings program is no easy task. It is a process. Where do you start? How do you get the information you need from your fee earners? How do you identify which are the best rankings for your firm? What should you include to make your submission or nomination stand out? We can break some of this down into bite-sized chunks.

Getting Started with Your Rankings Strategy

Your first order of business is to sit down and be honest with yourself and your fee earners about your strengths. No firm and no professional can be all things to all people, so don't try. Instead, use rankings to highlight the skills and experience that set you apart from your competitors.

Once you have your target areas, you have to find the organizations or publications that evaluate these areas. Depending on practice area and geography, you will have to adjust the size of your net. The results of this research will create the basis for your rankings calendar. Now, go through and evaluate each opportunity to make sure it's credible and aligned with your business development goals.

When planning your rankings calendar, keep in mind that participating in rankings, lists and awards submissions is a non-billable activity for your fee earners. That means it might not be their highest priority, even if it is yours. To accommodate, you need to build some padding into your project schedule to allow for missed deadlines in gathering or reviewing information.

Gathering Information for Rankings Submissions

Next, think about ways that you can get information from your fee earners that don't require much extra time. Can you get this information from a more-junior member or support staff of the client team?

A great way to collect information is through a template that is incorporated into the workflow for all client engagements. You might decide to have a trigger for this template — a certain value, area of practice, industry or whatever else fits with your rankings plan. When you are designing your template, think about the requirements for all of the submissions you plan to make. The less often you have to go back to your fee earners, the more likely they will be to complete your template.

Now that you have the information you need, how do you store and organize it? There are a number of methods, ranging from the low-tech — paper pages in a binder — to the high-tech — custom-built digital databases. The volume of data and resources available to you will drive your decision. For many firms, the best approach is to start somewhere in the middle with a spreadsheet.

Writing Standout Submissions

You have your submission requirements, deadlines and information about the client work. Now it's time to make the sausage: writing the killer submission. Bring out your inner storyteller and weave the work highlights into a narrative that sets you apart. As you write, think about how your team's work is unique, special or first of its kind.

This is your "sales pitch." You want to make sure that whoever reviews your submission can't help but agree that your firm is, or professionals are, a cut above. If you are working on something to recognize a practice or an entire firm, rather than individual professionals, make sure to show depth. One or two rock stars do not make an exemplary practice or firm. It is okay for them to be your cornerstones, but you also have to show those who are coming up behind them, those who support them, etc.

Still Need Help?

If you need help building a program or refining an existing program, Jaffe's RankingsForLawyers® and RankingsForAccountants™ team is here to help. We have partnered with many firms to help them develop rankings programs that are unique to their needs.

Over the course of two to three years, Jaffe will work alongside your firm's internal team throughout the entire rankings season, teaching you how to execute your customized program. During the first year, we help you develop templates for collecting data for rankings submissions; optimize reference lists; and create a workflow for all aspects of the rankings process, from nomination drafting through submission and tracking. We then gradually step back into a mentoring role, seamlessly allowing your internal team to take over the rankings program. At the end of year two or three, your team will have all the tools needed to maintain your rankings program independently — but that doesn't mean your work with our team has to end. We are still here to provide support as needed.

Want to talk more about your specific rankings program or your firm's needs? Need help getting started? You can reach out to me, Michelle McCormick, at mmccormick@jaffepr.com or 281.975.9447.