

Getting the Most Out of Legal Rankings

It seems that every year, the legal rankings landscape gets just a little more crowded and a lot more confusing – but that doesn't mean they aren't important. With more than 1.3 million licensed lawyers in the United States today, there is a lot of competition. You have to demonstrate how you stack up – and that is where rankings, lists and awards come in.

Thousands of legitimate U.S. and international rankings, lists and awards recognize lawyers. The key is to prioritize the rankings that align most closely with your business development goals and then optimize your time and effort.

Developing a rankings program is no easy task, in part because it is an entire process. Where do you start? How do you get the information you need from your fee earners? How do you identify the best rankings for your firm? What should you include to make your submission or nomination stand out? Let's break some of this down into bite-sized chunks.

Developing Your Strategy

Honestly assess your attorneys and practices relative to the competition, and prioritize those submissions you think are likely to be most successful. No firm and no lawyer can be all things to all people, so don't try. Instead, use rankings to highlight the skills and experiences that set your firm or attorneys apart. Look for organizations or publications that evaluate these areas. Now, go through and evaluate each opportunity to make sure it's credible and aligned with your business development goals. "Stretch goals" are great, and it is important to get on the radar of researchers, but remember that you need to focus and create realistic goals, too.

Gathering Information

When it comes time to collect the information needed for your submissions or nominations, think about ways to do this without requiring too much time from attorneys, since it is a non-billable activity.

One efficient method 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 your rankings plan. When you design your template, think about the requirements for all of the submissions you plan to make.

Writing Standout Submissions

Once you have your submission requirements, deadlines and information about the client work, it's time to make the sausage: writing the killer submission. Most firms end up



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regurgitating their websites when providing information about their attorneys. Researchers can look your attorneys up online and get all of this information. What they can't probably do is get details about your lawyers' newest and most-interesting client work. Focus on that work.

Bring out your inner storyteller and weave 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 lawyers are a cut above the rest.

If you are working on a submission 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 showcase those who are coming up behind them, those who support them, etc.

Review Gaps

While gathering information to prepare a rankings submission, evaluate how you can improve your client service. Often, working to answer questions in the submission will uncover things like silos or gaps in communication between practice groups or offices. If you look at your submission and notice a lot of work in one area (and a lot of referral work in a complementary area), ask yourself, "Has the firm thought about expanding to serve this need?"

Think about Client Feedback

Many rankings submissions require client feedback. Figuring out who will be the "best" client to put forth will require some internal evaluation. Choose references whom you have worked with over the past 12 months and who can give a good overview of your work together. It is not necessary to pick the person with the highest title; it is best to pick the person who will respond to the email or pick up the phone and give an honest review of your firm. Once you've identified those clients, take some time to evaluate what they might say about you and how you could serve them more effectively.

Rankings organizations are essentially completing client satisfaction surveys. Are you doing these with your clients directly? If not, think about how you can incorporate client feedback into your client service continuum. Many lawyers are reluctant to ask clients for feedback, and then are surprised when clients take their work elsewhere. Feedback is a good thing; it gives you the opportunity to improve your service and build deeper, long-lasting relationships with clients.

Recognize Your Lawyers

When you complete nominations for individuals in the firm, you often learn interesting things about them that should be celebrated. Use this information to recognize lawyers internally. Have they volunteered a tremendous amount of time with a nonprofit? Are they mentoring students? Are they prominent in bar service or other professional leadership roles? Have they published something of value to colleagues? Acknowledging things like

this will go a long way toward making your lawyers feel valued and appreciated. You can also acknowledge these activities through other firm channels, such as social media or public relations.

Repurpose, Repurpose, Repurpose

The valuable information you have gathered for your submissions can and should be repurposed for things like client alerts, articles, media relations or other thought leadership pieces. Viewing this time as a good investment will help make focusing on non-billable work appealing for lawyers.

Don't Get Frustrated

Don't be discouraged if your submission doesn't generate immediate results. For the most part, this is a marathon, not a sprint. Each award is different, and getting an attorney or firm ranked is often a strategic, multi-year process. If the ranking organization allows, ask for feedback on your submission. This is a good opportunity to get an objective review of the quality of your submissions and how your practice compares with others.

You might not be overly enthused about the time it takes to participate in rankings and awards, but they are important to enhancing your firm's credibility with current and prospective clients. Focusing on making the process as painless as possible and ensuring that you maximize the use of the information you collect will help to gain more buy-in.

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