

Get Ranked Alongside Big Law

Boutique and mid-size law firms have many advantages over big firms, but resources are not always among them. While Am Law 200 law firms may have marketing departments complete with a marketing strategist, skilled publicists and writers, and perhaps even a business development (BD) director, smaller firms may have just one or two people juggling all of the firm's publicity, marketing and BD.

For smaller firms, prioritizing where to allocate time and money is critical. At first glance, pursuing rankings and awards might not seem worth it. After all, there is no guarantee of success if you submit for an award – but ignoring rankings and awards might be a big mistake.

A strategic [law firm rankings and awards program](#) can become the hub connecting your firm's marketing, PR and business development efforts. Done right, rankings can do more than just elevate your firm's standing in the marketplace. You can use rankings to integrate and streamline your overall marketing strategy. Here's how to make rankings more approachable, and maybe even fun.

What is the benefit of pursuing legal rankings or awards?

The first question is whether pursuing a ranking in a major directory is even worth the investment of time and effort (and sometimes cost).

When firms pursue awards smartly and strategically, it has the following benefits:

- Stature – Show the marketplace that you are on the same level as bigger firms in the quality of your legal work.
- Retention – Investing in recognition for your attorneys helps them grow their reputations and practices.
- Recruitment – Attract high-quality lateral hires by showing them the quality of your firm and that you invest in your people.
- Business development – Rankings and awards are valuable for your marketing materials, responses to proposals and pitches.

There are a lot of tables, lists and awards out there. At Jaffe, we monitor the entire marketplace to bring opportunities to our clients through our proprietary rankings report. We know it can be head-spinning to decide where to start.

I've been Jaffe's rankings strategist for more than three years, and I've organized the various types of rankings opportunities out there in a [tier system](#) based on their prestige, rankings criteria and submission complexity.

At the top of the list are directories like the Legal 500 or Chambers and Partners. These top-tier directories are used by key decision-makers to find options when making legal



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hiring decisions. Small and mid-size law firms on these lists are truly showing that they can play with the big kids.

The second tier consists of national legal-focused publications such as *Law360* and the *National Law Review*, which recognize individual attorneys for their accomplishments. Then there are local, business and trade publications. Finally, there are peer-reviewed lists like Best Lawyers and Super Lawyers.

What's the best way to pursue legal rankings strategically?

At first glance, it seems like the place for small and mid-size law firms to start their rankings program would be near the middle or bottom of the tier system, since those would be the easiest to win and cost the least to pursue.

But that approach doesn't take in the whole picture. Aiming higher and going bigger could be better at serving your marketing efforts for the entire year.

People join boutique and mid-size law firms for many reasons – there may be internal politics at big firms or a leadership track may be too exhausting. Many of our clients at smaller firms are high-caliber practitioners. If your firm has top-class lawyers, there's no reason you wouldn't have a shot at landing in Chambers.

The [Chambers submission](#) is a heavy lift, but it yields immense rewards. Chambers is the Mecca of content.

- A one-hour interview yields a year's worth of content for awards.
- It's the best way to get attorneys to track matters and successes.
- It reveals your firm's differentiators.
- It provides pitch material for publicists.

Content for Other Awards

Our Chambers interviews take one hour per attorney, once a year. The first interview is the most involved since it's the first time we get to know a practice or an attorney. From that one-hour conversation, we gather enough detailed information to pursue other rankings opportunities for the attorney up and down the tiers, from the *Legal 500* to *Law360* to local awards like *Crain's Business Journals* or a local newspaper.

Matter Tracking

Marketing departments know that getting busy attorneys to track their matters throughout the year is impossible. With a one-hour interview once a year, you will identify the attorney's most important work and the ways they are making an impact on the legal and business community. You will also build a list of representative matters for the firm's website and pitch materials.

Firm and Attorney Differentiators

The stories we get through our Chambers interviews reveal practice niches and differentiators. For example, we had a client at a mid-size firm in a highly competitive city who was focused on construction access to neighboring properties. Even though he was young (in his mid-30s at the time), we succeeded in getting him ranked in Chambers after two years. Having this mid-size firm ranked against big guns in this city was a very big deal. (Perhaps not coincidentally, he was promoted to co-chair of his department the following year.)

Pitch Material for PR

How many publicists have sent an email to attorneys asking, "What are you working on these days? Anything interesting?" And received crickets in reply?

Attorneys are busy people, and PR isn't usually high on their list of priorities. At Jaffe, we always share our Chambers content with our publicists, who often find topics in the material to pitch to editors. A submission with 20 matters reveals a wealth of themes. For example, we have one client at an intellectual property boutique who is a valuable source about athleisure trade dress. We have another client who is highly knowledgeable about sensitive aspects of bankruptcy.

Each rankings submission should do double duty

Any ranking or award submission is a content generation opportunity. This doesn't apply only to Chambers if your resource ladder forces you to pick fruit that's hanging lower. When you do any submission for a ranking or award, the content can be repurposed for other accolades.

At Jaffe, one of the best parts of our work is taking a personal approach and getting to know attorneys. For one firm, we created a six-month rankings blitz about one lawyer who was doing amazing leadership work in advocating for women in law. We submitted for and won *National Law Journal* Trailblazers, and then used the content from our interview with her to pursue several other local and national awards.

Your firm can identify attorneys who did something groundbreaking at some point in their careers and find awards that are not centered on recent matters, but more on community or leadership contributions.

Likewise, we like to focus on diversity and equity opportunities. Submitting attorneys for diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) awards is immensely helpful in allowing firms to expand their [DEI efforts](#). For example, we submitted one young female managing partner at a litigation firm for an award for women in power in law. We included that win in the firm's annual DEI report, which helped it continue to push its diversity efforts.

Be smart in your targets

The one thing we do *not* do at Jaffe is throw spaghetti at the wall to see if it sticks. We take our role as a trusted adviser to firms seriously. We manage expectations and don't just nominate people for the sake of nominating them – we want wins for our clients.

We would not pursue a Chambers ranking if we did not think it was achievable. If there's a leadership award in a local publication where half the essay is about community involvement, but the attorney has none, we would pass on it.

Let's say your firm is in Chicago, and there is a *Crain's* 40 Under 40 award opportunity. I'd keep in mind that your attorney will be going up against everyone in Chicago who is doing something amazing, whether starting a charity for homeless children or opening a new no-waste restaurant. Will your attorney compete? I'd look at Gen X Leaders in Accounting, Consulting and Law, or something similar, instead.

The integrated approach

From where we stand at Jaffe, we get a mountaintop view of the marketing and PR landscape. Winning awards – which, by the way, helps attorneys feel appreciated and validated – provides more than just stature. It provides content. With that content, we can help you win more awards, we can write articles and social media posts, we can bolster business development pitches and [responses to RFPs](#), and we can pitch our attorneys to reporters and editors as knowledge leaders.

Rankings can be fun. You can be creative and flexible, you can get to know the attorneys at your firm and have relaxed conversations with them, you can write submissions essays about myriad topics with voice and style.

Or not. If you still think rankings are a total drag, but see how valuable they are for your marketing strategy, reach out to me, Eryan O'Keefe, at eokeefe@jaffepr.com, and we can handle it for you.