

LAW IN BUSINESS

Are legal directories still relevant? Yes, for large firms, but a new generation of directories will play into the hands of the smaller practices, argues Yuri Rapoport

The directory of the future

Although the scramble for top rankings in legal directories is on again, the majority of the UK's legal practices have little to worry about. Being of lesser significance to the legal landscape than their higher-tiered counterparts enables them to escape the grading process of the likes of the Legal 500 and Chambers & Partners.

However, are smaller firms blessed or burdened by the lack of interest from the top legal directories? And, if directories are relevant to the success of legal business *per se*, can smaller practices ever expect to share in such benefits?

Legal directories have for many years occupied a controversial niche. In the past, sceptics argued that the ranking process was highly subjective, and that directories fell short of properly reflecting marketplace realities. Many also felt that directories failed as an effective means for attracting new clients, which led to the perception that they were little more than instruments

designed to massage partner egos.

Nevertheless, directories continued to operate from year to year without shedding pages off their unwieldy volumes. Clearly there was a compelling reason why the top law firms offered up their annual contributions; but nobody actually mentioned what it was.

Legal directories have been with us all this time because they had to be. Contrary to common perception, their rankings are not merely biased declarations about a given law firm's status — in fact, it is the consumer market that decides the standing of any law firm. Directories simply endeavour to tell us what the market thinks; that is, they serve the essential function of reporting facts about the legal industry.

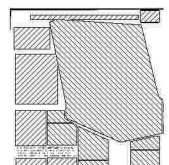
Regardless of any debate about the quality of the actual reporting, legal directories are, by and large, as indispensable to the legal

market as the top financial publications are to the financial market. That is the key reason why larger firms take legal directories so seriously.

The market opinion presented by a legal directory is important to law firms not because a positive review can pander to prospective clients (although this can be a useful fringe benefit), but mainly because it helps law firms retain existing clients. In other words, clients who pay top money for legal services will, from time to time, query their costs. A top-ranking score by a reputable legal directory can be very helpful in justifying a reply.

Conversely, receiving a poor rank from a legal directory can be disastrous in terms of lawyer-client relations, particularly when your clients expect only the best.

The relevance of legal directories



also extends to corporate executives. A law firm's rank can help validate a company's legal expense to both its shareholders and to government regulators. Obviously, nobody waves about a legal directory when settling their solicitor's bill, but if push comes to shove about a law firm's standing, it is nice to know that such a book exists.

Although, the above canons warrant that the relevance of top legal directories will continue, the marketplace to which such publications cater is itself changing rapidly. The advent of internet-based technologies is making the legal directory an instrument capable of providing

new dimensions in communication between service providers and consumers.

As legal directories evolve to deliver a broader scope of information for consumers (for example, individual lawyers' track records), their relevance is likely to widen across the entire legal profession. Such transformation is set to make the legal directory an indispensable tool for consumers looking to find smaller sized firms, sole practitioners and barristers.

Although this area of legal marketing

is still in its infancy, internet technologies have long been ready for lawyers to embrace the idea of selling professional services online. Similar to price comparison sites currently operating in the insurance, travel and finance markets, the new directories will enable instant evaluation of a lawyer's legal experience and professional expertise.

However, it will be up to individual practitioners to place information about themselves on these web-based publications. While, previously, smaller firms could afford to shake off the directory season as something 'irrelevant', in the future these firms may recognise the value of publicly tendering their practice profiles, as consumers show increasing preference towards 'pulling' information off the internet rather than having it 'pushed' onto them by legal advertising.

With the Legal Services Act 2007 advocating greater choice for consumers, lawyers can start unveiling the abundance of distinguishing information about their professional experience

to the public.

Giving consumers the opportunity to weigh up individual lawyers by comparing experience and expertise, enables one to make an informed decision based on measurable

criteria.

For example, a consumer might wish to locate a lawyer with prior dealings against a specific type of company or organisation, or with at least 10 years' experience in a given area of practice. By making such information publicly available, and conceding to the powers of online technologies, lawyers will help prospective clients locate them more easily.

The advent of new legal directories for smaller-sized law firms will mean lowering expenses on advertising, and individual practitioners receiving only the type of work they are actually good at doing. Overall, such change can contribute significantly to the business success of individual practices.

For now, all that is missing is the actual website where lawyers can state their unique selling proposition, and where consumers can find it.

Whereas, directories like the Legal 500 will undoubtedly remain a highly relevant component of the legal marketplace, it will be online directories for the legal 'under-500' whose relevance will significantly rise in the future. ■

Dr Yuri Rapoport is the founder of Prime Law Brokers (Australia).

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