

Directory direction

Law firms across Europe devote tens of thousands of hours of marketing time slaving over submissions for the growing number of legal profession directories. But, asks **Jeffrey Forbes**, is the effort worth the results?



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When weekly news magazine *US News & World Report* announced last July that it was joining forces with legal peer review bible *Best Lawyers* to launch a new law firm ranking table, the groans from America's law firm marketers would have been audible from some distance. And understandably so, as marketing and business development teams in the States already have to sort through more than 900 different legal league tables and directories that are published across the vast jurisdiction.

In contrast, their counterparts in Europe should consider themselves lucky as they do not have to deal with such a deluge. Instead, most lawyers in Europe turn to the Legal 500, Chambers, Martindale or another local source.

But do such legal rankings really help clients? Or are they just a waste of time for marketers because they are mainly read by the law firms that submit a profile?

Active marketing

This topic was debated recently during an on-line meeting of Practice Development Managers Europe, an e-mail-based discussion group whose members are marketing and business development professionals at law and accountancy firms across continental Europe. A selection of their comments is informative.

'I regard the directories as a reflection of the branding and marketing activities of the firm and its partners,' says Erik Werkman, the Prague-based head of corporate communications at Vienna-headquartered law firm Schoenherr and one time researcher at Chambers. 'You

can make it into the lowest tier of any section with a good submission, references and a decent interview. However, going up in the ranking requires your name to be known in the legal market, whether through headline legal work or active marketing. It is the latter that some partners find rather frustrating, because they may see the rankings purely as an objective reflection of the quality of legal services provided.'

Local rankings

'In Poland,' comments Monika Grzybowska, marketing manager for the Warsaw office of New York-based firm Chadbourne & Parke, 'international directories may only be good for a few foreign clients who do not know anyone in the local market. In Polish business circles such directories are less well known unless presented by a law firm that quotes their own listing to make their marketing materials seem more reliable. Therefore, local rankings prepared by national dailies are much more useful, at least for prestige purposes, even though they often lack the analysis and client references of international rankings.'

According to Daria Nazarova, head of business development at the Moscow office of London-based firm Herbert Smith: 'It can be counterproductive to submit to too many legal directories as only a small number are genuinely respected and writing the submissions is very time-consuming, with an uncertain return on time investment. The other important thing is to ensure colleagues who prepare submissions understand what researchers want and carefully read the submission guidelines. Partners also need to be properly

briefed before interviews so they maximise opportunities.'

Adds Viktoria Braychenko, marketing & PR assistant for Schoenherr in Kiev: 'In Ukraine, lawyers and clients mainly point to a local publication covering the 50 leading Ukrainian law firms compiled by a local newspaper.' And from Hungary, Mihaly Varga, the regional business development manager for Anglo-US law firm DLA Piper's Budapest office, remarks: 'It would be difficult to find any experienced legal marketer who would not be in agreement that directory submissions are highly controversial to manage. So what I regard as key is to manage expectations at all levels, which in this instance is not a cliché but dead serious because of the lack of scientific analysis about the way such directories operate.'

Mr Varga advises law firms to adopt a four-point approach to dealing with directories:

- maintain a presence as keeping brand visibility through that channel will not be harmful;
- know what to say and how to say it to researchers, because their time available for each law firm is short;
- maintain cordial relations with the researchers and provide precise and objective information;
- explain to partners and other lawyers at the law firm in clear terms what these directories stand for and what they can or cannot expect from such rankings.

Although a 2008 survey of in-house counsel in CEE showed that legal directories are not the first resource for clients when identifying law firms to hire, the issue of rankings in directories is a recurring topic.