

MASTERCLASS - GETTING THE HIGHEST VALUE FROM THE LEGAL DIRECTORIES

Posted on 19/10/2008



Category: [In-house news](#)



Participants at a recent *Iberian Lawyer* Master Class debated the merits of the directories, and managing the submission and ranking processes involved.

Recent years have seen an explosion in the number of international legal directories and rankings aiming to research and compare the quality of law firms, and their individual lawyers, and an increasingly wide variety of rankings and league tables.

Some law firms view these directories and rankings as an important opportunity to promote the high quality of their practices and lawyers, while for others they are a major headache. Partners report that their participation in the major directories is increasingly time-consuming and expensive and yet may still not adequately reflect their true skills and market reputation.

Master Class Panel

Alex Morrall, Publisher PLCWhich lawyer?

Chris Scoble, Former Head of Marketing, Dewey Ballantine and Orrick; Esprima Consulting, London

Fiona Boxall, Managing Director, Chambers and Partners

José Luis Huerte, Head of Dispute Resolution, Lovells

Lloyd Pearson, Former Editor, Chambers Directory and Communications Manager at Herbert Smith (London), and White & Case (New York)

Rosana Rumschisky, Director of Communications and Marketing, Gómez-Acebo & Pombo

The directory and legal ranking submission process – for titles such as *Chambers*, *PLC Which lawyer?*, *Legal 500*, *IFLR1000*, and *mergermarket*, etc – has for many become the biggest annual marketing challenge.

Catalyst or catastrophe

Participants at Iberian Lawyer's Master Class suggested however that despite the array of directories, rankings and deal tables now covering the legal profession, the growth of information on law firms, legal practices and legal markets is however a broadly positive development. The third party endorsements provided by the research-led directories enables firms to benchmark their own success while also demonstrating their distinct expertise to potential clients and referral law firms, domestically and internationally.

"There is a love-hate relationship among law firms with the legal directories but they have undoubtedly helped to open up the markets, and the high pr

ofile of the leading publications would clearly not be possible if there was a definite perception of bias in the research processes," said Chris Scoble, who moderated the debate. Now a consultant with Esprima Consultant he was previously European Marketing Manager at both Orrick and Dewey Ballantine, based in London.

It is important Scoble believes

however, that if firms are to engage with the law firm directories they do not regard the submission processes, and ranking outcomes, as distinct elements but instead as integral aspects of the total communications strategy.

"The directory submission process can be utilised as a very effective way to capture information on the firm and its activities and presenting it, alongside the rankings that the directories provide, as part of a wider strategic message across virtually all the marketing, business development and recruitment materials."

La reciente clase magistral, organizada por Iberian Lawyer sobre cómo sacar el máximo partido a los directorios jurídicos, ofreció un debate sobre las cuestiones y el fondo del proceso de elaboración de los directorios. Lo importante, como se pudo escuchar en la reunión, es entender que los directorios no son una pieza aislada dentro del marketing sino que forman parte de la estrategia global de comunicación.

The belief is one that Lloyd Pearson, a former Chambers Editor, and subsequently Communications Manager at Herbert Smith in London and White & Case in New York, agrees with, but he noted however some of the difficulties that firms' marketing departments can face in managing the submission processes, and in deciding which directories to work with.

"What the directories require is concise information delivered according to their own timetables and

supported by interviews with enthusiastic lawyers. But the marketing department can often find it difficult to balance the needs and timings of the directory submission process with firms' internal processes, and the willingness even of partners to engage with it."

If the marketing teams are to spend the time and effort involved with the submission processes, and in relaying the usefulness of the work to partners, it is vital that they also fully understand who they are being asked to work with and the potential return on investment.

"Firms must be able to get credible answers about readership and distribution, understand the research methodology involved and the experience of the research teams, and then decide whether they are comfortable working with a particular organisation."

Clients' perspective

An area of much interest surrounded the extent to which law firms' clients are involved in the directory research process, and whether they actually use the directories (see box Do clients use legal directories?). A number of participants questioned even the need for client references, and voiced concerns over confidentiality issues, as well as the danger of clients being over-burdened with requests for information.

"Bar rules and data protection regulations in Spain prevent law firms from supplying client references and their contact details, but in any event we would always want to make sure that our clients were not inundated by research requests," said Rosana Rumschisky, panellist and Director of Communications and Marketing at Gómez-Acebo & Pombo.

The point was echoed by José Luis Huerte, another panellist, and Head of Dispute Resolution at Lovells in Madrid. "I am always careful about referencing my clients, particularly as a litigator. The work may have been confidential, or at the least sensitive, and before offering their details I will always get in touch."

It is however client recommendations that have the most impact on firms' standing in the rankings say Fiona Boxall, Managing Editor at Chambers, and Alex Morrall, publisher of *PLCWhich lawyer?*. Firms should therefore take the time to assess who they are offering as references, how much contact they have with the firm and their ability to offer up-to-the date information, they say.

"It is no use offering the CEO of a company, or General Counsel, as a reference if they are impossible to contact or are too far removed from day-to-day events in the legal department," says Boxall. Alex Morrall agrees: "What is important for us is to get the opinions of people who actually work with firms' lawyers, and often it is not the big name banks or finance houses that will provide the most impressive references but the smaller companies with which the firms' lawyers have built the strongest and most trusted relationships."

Do clients use legal directories?

Iberian Lawyer surveyed in-house lawyers across Iberia for their views on the international researched legal directories: whether they use them, what they use them for and how involved they are in the submission and research processes. The survey was conducted of 75 in-house lawyers with a response rate of 44%.

The research reveals that the many in-house lawyers across Iberia do use legal directories as part of a wider lawyer and law firm research and selection process. Among respondents, 86% stated that they do use them. The most significant reasons being: to check the reputation of lawyers / law firms recommended to them in their domestic markets; to find lawyers / law firms to advise on new areas of company operations; to find new lawyers / law firms in new countries of company operations; or

to check the reputation of lawyers / law firms already used.

When surveyed, all of the respondents stated that they would be happy for a law firm to use them, with prior notice, as a reference in their legal directory submission. Among those that expanded their answers, many prefer to only comment favourably about the lawyers and law firms they had worked with, and been referenced by, and with which they have already established a relationship of trust.

Clearly the legal directories are penetrating the Iberian in-house legal market, Iberian Lawyer's research demonstrates that when an in-house reference is offered in the submission process it may very likely be followed up. It pays therefore to offer clients as references, but perhaps more so, to offer the firm's closest clients who are likely to offer the very best recommendations.

The vast majority of respondents (73%) stated that they have been contacted by legal directory researchers.

Please contact maricruz.taboada@iberianlegalgroup.com for the full report

any event, alongside the references supplied by firms, Chambers has a pool of 670 "super clients", while PLC has over 1,500 company subscribers, from which they also draw market opinions. Both publications, they say, are also careful to co-ordinate their research so that inhouse lawyers are contacted only as much as is absolutely necessary.

"In any event, in my experience, the in-house lawyers are a lot less concerned about this issue than the law firms and are often only too happy to engage in the process – many see it as one of the few chances to really get their voices across," says Alex Morrall.

Researcher relationships

But alongside managing firms' relationships with their clients during the directory research process, also significant, said many of those that attended, was the relationship that firms also build with individual directory researchers – a change of which can often mean having to re-educate them not only about firms' own practices but entire legal markets, said Maria Roquette Cardoso, Director of Communications and marketing at Sérvulo & Associados in Lisbon.

Both Fiona Boxall and Alex Morrall acknowledged that such changes can present firms with issues but emphasise that it is important to rotate researchers between practice areas and regions.

"We are fundamentally a research organisation and it is important that we maintain our objectivity so we rotate our researchers every two years. But the information we have previously received is not lost, we have background data that new researchers are expected to access, and for the months that they are doing the research they are deeply immersed in it. If they are not 100% certain of their findings they must keep going," says Fiona Boxall.

In any event, researchers have to justify their league table rankings before senior editors, say both.

"It is important for us to have confidence not only in the research findings, but also the research processes," says Alex Morrall. "We have a 'quality assurance' process to confirm researchers' editorial but also the emphasis they have given specific information: deal lawyers, for example, see many more of their peers across the table than perhaps tax practitioners, so it is important to measure the relative weight given throughout the research process."

Managing submissions

Reflective of the volume of work involved in managing directory and ranking submission requests many firms now have dedicated personnel managing the process. "While at White & Case we produced 2,500 submissions across the firm in one year," said Lloyd Pearson.

The issues facing Iberia's law firms may not be on the same scale but Rosana Rumschisky at Gómez-Acebo & Pombo, noted that her team handled 45 submission requests in the first half of 2008 alone. Interest inevitably turned therefore to what the ideal submission should encompass.

"My ideal submission would be one page long, is honest about the firms' strengths and puts them in a wider market context," said Fiona Boxall. "A 40-page submission wastes the firms' time and in all likelihood will not be read by the research teams. What is useful is for firms to be able to state, succinctly, what the partners have been doing this year that they weren't doing the previous year."

What is also important is to differentiate firms and to offer a qualitative demonstration of partners' specific expertise, noted Lloyd Pearson. "In my experience I have had much more success making submission statements like 'Our firm acted for seven out of the ten leading telecoms companies' and recording a few acknowledged innovative deals, than merely listing two pages of telecoms deals."

The directory submission process, and the rankings produced, are ultimately as important to the firms as they want them to be, noted the panel. While the directories are able to conduct their research without the firms' own input the outcome may not however accurately reflect current strengths or expertise.

"The issue for firms is which of these publications is the most important for our target clients and which ones should we get involved with?" asked Rosana Rumschisky. "Directories do not themselves make a firm's reputation but they do play a role and how much of an impact we think they have will inevitably dictate the resources we dedicate to them."