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The new Chambers and Legal 500 UK directories will soon be online. Any lawyer who tells you that they don't matter is telling a lie. They do.

Published by Chambers and Partners (Chambers) and Legalease (the Legal 500 Series), the London-based directories have been part of the legal landscape since the mid 1980s: mandatory reference tools for law firms, their clients, law students, young lawyers - and journalists.

Still privately owned by their respective founders - Michael Chambers (Chambers and Partners) and John Pritchard (Legal 500) - both publishers now span the globe, covering 180 jurisdictions with an assortment of regional and national variants. They employ nearly 250 staff between them.

Based upon extensive market research, their directories identify and recommend the best firms and the best lawyers in up to 70 practice areas, subdivided into graduated bands or rankings, each fully supported by independent editorial analysis.

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Despite the blend of curiosity and cynicism that initially greeted the flagship UK editions when they first appeared, they have long since become firmly embedded as an essential resource: over four million users visit the Legal 500 website each year, for example. They are well regarded too. Talk to any international lawyer from Sao Paulo to Shanghai, and Chambers and/or Legal 500 will inevitably punctuate the narrative of their conversation at some point.

In my publishing past, I employed more than a dozen staff who had previously worked for one or both publishers. It's worth declaring that I have no commercial interest in either, although I do confess to being a serial online user of their combined output. A few years ago, I spent an informative afternoon with Michael Chambers and some of his team, and I have also written occasionally for Legal Business magazine (published by Legalease).

More recently, two things have fuelled my interest:

- 1) Working on diverse projects in the London offices of international law firms;
- 2) The Chambers and Legal 500 directory submissions sent to me by local firms as part of the interview process in writing research reports, covering Asian, European and US legal markets.

What's struck me is the enormous effort put into directory submissions by skilled marketing teams across a broad spectrum of firms – from magic circle giants to offshore boutiques. That effort is tangible evidence of how influential they are perceived to be: many firms and barristers' chambers prominently cite rankings on their websites, affirming their importance while business development professionals actively use rankings to promote their firms.

As part of their submissions, law firms vigorously argue the case for individual lawyers and practice areas to be rated more highly, supported by a wealth of summary documentation relating to transactional, contentious, regulatory or other work, and an abundance of client references and testimonials.

My sympathy goes to law firm marketers everywhere; this process can be the bane of their lives! From their collective efforts, three questions arise:

1. Do law firm clients use them?

Talk to general counsel and they will tell you: yes, they do. But only sometimes. The GCs in Fortune 500 or FTSE100 companies do not spend their days poring through directories, and no-one will ever admit to choosing a lawyer/firm based

solely on their ranking. Instead, they use them intermittently as part of the mix of intelligence when choosing lawyers across jurisdictions. Most often this is a form of validation: to confirm that the partner/firm pitching to them, or whom their primary law firm is recommending or referring work to in another jurisdiction, is recognized and rated. They also use them as a form of market intelligence to learn more about the latest perceptions of the key players. In short: they trust them.

2. How accurate are they?

After nearly thirty years in the game, Chambers and the Legal 500 do seem to get it right most of the time. But many lawyers will argue otherwise, most especially about who should, or should not be, in the top bands - Chambers' year-on-year rankings are seen as being less volatile than the Legal 500. From my (limited) experience, both identify key players pretty well, although there can be perception drift: leading individuals sometimes remain highly rated when, in truth, they are beyond their best, while some rising stars are recognised too slowly. Smaller jurisdictions cause most problems because data sources are more scarce.

3. How do firms improve their rankings/get themselves ranked?

The brutal truth is that if you're not rated by either directory, you're probably not seen as a player. Being risk averse, big companies may therefore be unlikely to use you. The problem in getting yourself on the ranking ladder is that this requires doing work for clients who matter. It's a difficulty facing many aspirant firms and ambitious lawyers. Prominent lateral hires, strategic mergers, effective pitching and predatory pricing can all help to deliver more quality work, which in turn serves to boost rankings, or create one that did not previously exist. But most effort inevitably goes into maintaining an existing position or improving it by doing good work, and being recognised accordingly. Either way, the competitive pressures help improve the service given to clients.

And it's not all plain sailing for those who make it. Law firms become especially bothered by high rankings achieved in some practice areas alongside lower ones in others. Individual partners and practice leaders pay particularly close attention to this: they want uniform excellence. As a band one firm, or as one of the most highly rated individuals, keeping yourself in pole position presents its own challenges. But that's another story...

If you have any comments on this year's legal directories, or would like to know more about what I can do for your firm, please do get in touch.