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Rankings: a growing industry

CHEW XIANG finds out whether having a presence in a ranking publication has any impact on a law firm's reputation or business

IT WAS only 17 years ago that law firms here were first allowed to advertise their services, with the publishing of the Legal Profession (Publicity) Rules in 1993.

That was partly in response to calls from some lawyers who argued that foreign firms, not bound by Singapore's restrictions, were aggressively expanding their practices with modern marketing techniques. Before that, the rules were highly restrictive. In 1991, two law firms were reported to the Law Society because a Business Times article announcing their merger was considered advertising and improper.

Yet even after 1993, lawyers could publicise only basic information such as areas of interest, contact numbers and names, qualifications and awards. It was only in 1998 that they were allowed to advertise in newspapers, on television and the Internet, and till today many of the more conservative firms and lawyers are still wary of publicity and marketing.

Into the void has stepped a growing industry of law firm rankings. Most lawyers agree that a mention in a credible ranking or publication adds value and increases visibility - and there is another crucial advantage. 'You can't blow your own horn so it's far better when others do it for you,' says one senior lawyer. (And far cheaper too, he adds, cheekily.) Most lawyers of at least some seniority mention on their web sites their credentials, backed by references in the leading publications.

But even the rankings industry is highly stratified. Lawyers BT spoke to say Chambers, Legal 500 and International Financial Law Review tend to be the ones more looked out for. The more reputable ones generally spend a lot of time and effort canvassing opinions from across the industry, including fellow lawyers, rival firms and even clients, so as to build up a complete picture. Some conduct detailed surveys of lawyers by polling their peers while others specialise in collating data about the value and number of deals worked on. Certain publications specialising in niche areas of law or business are also seen as credible.

Some of the others however, are viewed with more scepticism, with two names in particular seen with a fair amount of disfavour. 'It's an open secret amongst lawyers that with some firms, their ranking rises proportionately with the amount of advertising placed with that publication,' says Senior Counsel Thio Shen Yi, joint managing partner of TSMP Law Corp. 'Obviously the biggest and best players will not be ignored, regardless of whether they advertise, but some inclusions simply leave me baffled and wondering whether any proper research was done.'

The issue, while not widely spoken of, is tacitly admitted by the industry. For instance, Who's Who Legal notes on its website that 'it is not possible to buy entry into any Who's Who Legal publication'. Even if rankings appear honest as they come, some are let down by lack of professionalism and knowledge, says one senior lawyer. 'Most deals have two law firms at least but sometimes only one of them gets picked up (for mention) or there is wrong attribution,' he says. 'The question is, can they get their process right?' He, too, has come across rankings 'totally out of whack with how the rest of the market sees things.' Mr Thio notes that 'in recent years, with the global financial crisis, publications have cut back on spending which has impacted the amount of on-the-ground research they have done. This means that some of their conclusions may not be that updated.'

Publications, in fact, have an incentive to make sure their rankings aren't too incredible, says a partner at a leading local firm. 'Once they gain a reputation for doing that, many law firms will not subscribe. And if clients, banks and in-house counsel are aware then they won't regard the publication as credible.'

Most lawyers say the industry still operates largely on referrals via word of mouth, so directories and rankings usually play a secondary, confirmatory role. 'If I need a law firm, say in Alabama, I might contact a New York law firm for a recommendation, and if they give me someone, I'll go to Legal 500 or Chambers to see if they are recommended as well,' says the partner at a leading Singapore firm.

But even with or without rankings some of the names at the top of the ladder are obvious and widely known. Among the big local firms, in capital markets, corporate and merger and acquisition work, Allen & Gledhill and WongPartnership are generally acknowledged as the top tier, lawyers say, due to

their depth of experience and several star names. Drew & Napier and Rajah & Tann on the other hand are seen as among the top litigation and dispute resolution firms, and most publications bear this out. Other firms have a very strong reputation in niche areas, such as ATMD Bird & Bird in intellectual property. But further down the food chain, and particularly when it comes to individual lawyers, new business still depends to varying extents on personal contacts and referrals, lawyers say.

Others find different uses for the annual gongs. 'Rankings, whilst important, aren't crucial, however they can be good for morale', says Chris Lowe, who heads the Singapore office of Watson, Farley & Williams. 'There's a bit of downplaying but generally speaking people do like getting that bit of plastic or perspex. It doesn't hurt, but it doesn't necessarily achieve much either.'

And when it comes to the dollars and sense of internal promotions and hiring, a good presence in the publications is not always relevant. 'For us, it is ultimately competence, character and integrity that determines who we recruit and who we promote,' says Mr Thio. But applicants trained in a firm with a good reputation in some specific field of law will be assumed to have gained valuable relevant experience, he says.

But in the longer run, law firms will have to pay ever more attention to business development and marketing, argues consultant Robert Sawhney (see page 4). 'No longer can the big local firms simply rely on their reputation and relationships to generate work. As clients demand greater value and alternative fees, firms will have to take a serious look at the way they do things ... Reputation will no longer be driven by past capital and will be increasingly driven by client value and satisfaction,' he writes. That means law firms may have to go beyond the traditional rankings and directories to make their presence felt in an increasingly competitive landscape.

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