

How Do You Rate?

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Consumers have a long history of consulting various ratings sources to obtain an objective evaluation of a product before making a purchase. The Internet has facilitated access to these evaluation tools and helped popularize their use in guiding purchase decisions for everything from consumer products to professional services. Even serious life choices, such as the selection of a physician, are now informed by Web-based resources that include reviews and ratings of doctors.

With this kind of rich online information to guide potential buyers, expectations are now elevated for every buying decision – both personal and professional – and those “shopping” for legal representation have access to a wide variety of ratings and rankings of lawyers and law firms. In order to compete and thrive in today’s legal marketplace, both in-house counsel and law firm attorneys need to understand the role that ratings systems play in informing the buying decision. Lawyers must also recognize that they are being publicly evaluated by more parties than ever before and not just on their legal ability, but on price, perceived value, their ability to communicate with their clients and many other factors.

What Do Buyers Want?

There is no substitute for first-hand knowledge or referrals from trusted peers when evaluating lawyers or law firms. Sometimes, however, the referral or first-hand experience is not available. That is why clients, particularly inside counsel, are increasingly looking for objective information, such as comparison tools and ratings, to help them make a more informed buying decision or to create a short list when selecting their lawyer or law firm.

There has been an increase in the availability of online ratings tools specifically used to evaluate legal services. Such tools include industry-standard ratings that have previously only been known to members of the Bar, ratings and opinions offered by past and present clients, and the launch of new ratings services that rely on mathematic algorithms to arrive at a quantitative score of a lawyer or firm’s experience.

The emergence of these new tools is facilitating a significant change in the way that buyers of legal services evaluate lawyers. Buyers see these tools as an effective means to supplement or validate the information that comes from referrals and word-of-mouth recom-

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mendations, and an aid in helping them to create a short-list using the most credible and objective data available.

A 2006 study by Clear Horizons, commissioned by Martindale-Hubbell, captured the demand for this objective data from all buyers of legal services – ranging from individuals and small businesses to in-house counsel at major corporations. The study results demonstrate that while lawyer credentials are still a major consideration when clients are selecting a law firm, additional data from an objective source increases a lawyer’s or firm’s credibility in the eyes of the buyer. Of those surveyed:

- 88 percent look for a lawyer’s level of expertise;
- 88 percent look for depth of experience in a specific matter of relevance to them;
- 86 percent look for matters handled in the past;
- 68 percent look for industries serviced in the past; and
- 51 percent look for background provided by directories such as Martindale-Hubbell.

How Do Lawyers Meet This Need?

The law firm Web site continues to serve as an effective online platform for lawyers to showcase their credentials. Law firm Web sites have grown in sophistication, but as important as these “standalone” sites are, the fact is that they are often general marketing platforms and difficult for buyers to use as a tool for comparing and contrasting one lawyer or firm with another.

In contrast, some of the well-known online lawyer directories – such as Martindale-Hubbell, FindLaw and the dozens of bar association lawyer referral services available nationwide – are changing the way they present lawyers’ credentials online to make them more accessible and easier for prospective clients to conduct side-by-side comparisons. Some of these services even feature online applications that automate the process of contacting a specific attorney who matches a client’s needs by the click of a mouse on a Web page.

What Are Clients Saying About You?

Internally, lawyers and law firms are also increasingly relying on client satisfaction surveys to benchmark the perceptions of their clients. In fact, according to a 2008 survey by Incisive Media, more than half of all responding law firms said they now do client satisfaction surveys as part of their outreach to current clients. The larger the firm, the more likely they are to conduct surveys. Lawyers have discovered that client feedback is an invaluable commodity for them when it comes to the growth of their practice or law firm. The survey revealed that 63 percent of law firms said that client satisfaction surveys are their most effective business development tools and 93 percent of respondents called them either extremely effective or moderately effective.

Not only are client surveys beneficial to law firms, tapping into feedback offered by clients adds valuable perspective to buyers evaluating a particu-

lar law firm. There are now several innovative services that collect and display client reviews of lawyers and law firms for buyers. Taking their cue from the consumer-facing review services that preceded them, these services pose specific questions to clients about a lawyer’s service and relationship, using various point scales to conduct their assessment. They also provide an opportunity for narrative feedback about the experience a client had working with the lawyer in question (e.g., “effective courtroom skills,” “very responsive to emails,” etc.).

The list of respected providers in this area is growing. It includes:

- **Chambers and Partners**, a highly regarded lawyer directory publisher in the U.K. that has now expanded to the U.S. and other countries;
 - **Lawdragon**, a company founded by former legal journalists that publishes profiles and evaluations of lawyers;
 - **Avvo**, a start-up company that publishes client feedback regarding individual lawyers; and,
 - **Martindale-Hubbell**, which recently introduced Client Review ratings to complement their established Peer Review Ratings Program.
- Depending on their target demographic, lawyers have more opportunities than in the past to highlight their experience to potential clients by participating in the review programs these providers offer. Each ratings and review system offers different benefits and visibility opportunities and should be evaluated by lawyers to determine which systems address their target market most effectively. Similarly, potential buyers of legal services can evaluate for themselves which ratings resources measure and report on criteria they deem most useful.

What Do Your Peers Think?

In addition to client reviews, lawyers are in the unique position of providing peer-to-peer assessments of other lawyers due to the frequent interaction they have with one another, whether it is as opposing counsel in litigation or while negotiating transactions. More than a century ago, the publishers at Martindale-Hubbell recognized this peer-to-peer dynamic in the legal profession and created the Martindale-Hubbell Peer Review Ratings. The ratings service, which the company facilitates, uses the familiar AV and BV certification marks to provide an objective rating of the legal ability and ethics of lawyers in the U.S., and was the first to rely upon confidential peer assessments of lawyers to arrive at a Peer Review Rating.

In recent years, though, a number of other companies have emerged in an attempt to provide buyers of legal services with peer feedback based on a proprietary algorithm. Avvo, for example, uses peer review feedback to help them construct the lawyer rating they assign to U.S. lawyers in their system. In addition, *Best Lawyers* and *Super-Lawyers* both produce lawyer directories that make use of detailed peer eval-

uations of a lawyer’s skills and ethics in determining who to recognize with their lists of accomplished lawyers.

Moreover, the Martindale-Hubbell Peer Review Ratings have been reconfigured in the past year to be more relevant to a wider range of users, and will soon include ratings for specific areas of practice and a new policy that allows younger lawyers to obtain the highest possible ratings if their legal credentials merit such a designation by their peers. These and other changes – including the launch of Martindale-Hubbell Connected (a global online network for legal professionals); the integration of Chambers ratings within lawyer and law firm profiles on martindale.com; an agreement with LinkedIn offering martindale.com users direct access to the LinkedIn network; and more – are part of a broader transformation effort underway at Martindale-Hubbell.

It is more important than ever for lawyers to embrace quality ratings services because they deliver exactly what buyers are demanding: transparent and objective data and evaluation tools. Ratings can be an effective and valuable piece of this puzzle, particularly when combined with first-hand knowledge, peer referrals and other third party data from trusted sources as well as information provided by the lawyers themselves.

Who Are We To Judge?

Some legal pundits have suggested that the proliferation of new ratings and ranking systems have eroded, to some degree, the overall value of ratings to both consumers and lawyers themselves. It is reasonable to suggest that not all ratings systems are of equal utility, objectivity or accuracy. Similarly, no one ratings system can claim to offer the “final word” on which lawyer or law firm is best in a given jurisdiction or area of practice.

The marketplace usually does a good job of weeding out goods and services – be they mediocre restaurants, ineffective lawyers or dubious ratings systems – that consumers find unreliable or of limited value. Ultimately, consumers will gravitate to ratings and ranking systems that are the most transparent, that come from trusted sources well known within the legal community, and that reliably measure desired attributes in a way that best facilitates an apples-to-apples comparison between lawyers and firms.

The prevalence and growing use of ratings systems should motivate lawyers to deliver better value and client service, just as increased competition motivates the best ratings providers to deliver to consumers better and more reliable information in a format that best meets the needs of those consumers. The result of this pursuit will be a more informed potential buyer armed with better and more comprehensive information about lawyers under consideration. All of this contributes to better-qualified leads for the law firm and improved service and legal outcomes for the client.

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