

Directory Rankings: Significant Steps

Founded in 2005, ILFS has helped law firms in more than 100 jurisdictions improve their rankings and reduce the amount of time they spend on making submissions to directories such as Chambers, Legal 500 and IFLR 1000.

This is a short overview of what we regard as the most important factors to take into account in the Legal Directory ranking process rather than a comprehensive guide.

[Be confident that you have a good enough case to be ranked before spending hours on a submission](#)

A firm* came to ILFS saying that it wished to submit in a specialist area. It was quite a new firm and had not previously made any submissions. They had already spent several hours preparing their submission – which gave a lot of information about the type of work they could do, rather than the work they had done. As we discussed this with them it was apparent that although they wanted to build their reputation in the area they had actually only undertaken one, albeit significant, assignment in the practice area. That was highly confidential and they could not mention it in the submission. For the same reasons they were unable to ask their client for a reference, or anyone else who had been involved in the assignment. Despite exploring a number of other possibilities there was no other evidence they could offer of actual work done in the practice area.

Guidance: Before submitting in any practice area, particularly for the first time, take a view on whether you have a realistic chance of being ranked. If you don't you can waste a lot of time and undermine your credibility in other submissions. Don't submit unless you can put forward "sufficient" work highlights and references (particularly to Chambers). What is deemed sufficient varies depending on your jurisdiction and how specialist/main stream the practice area is. If in doubt, ask – you can save yourself hours!

[Meet the deadlines](#)

For most clients we prepare draft submissions/reference sheets which the clients review and return to us. We usually ask for these at least a week before the official deadline so we can undertake a further review and work with the client to improve the submission. Unsurprisingly we quite often receive them on, or after the deadlines. This is not a criticism. Many of us have been practicing lawyers and we know that client work will always take priority. However, if you want to improve your rankings it is a missed opportunity.

Guidance: Some directories have become much stricter on deadlines and missing a deadline can be fatal to your case. Other directories will accept late submissions and agree to contact referees that have been filed late. However, if you file submission documents after the deadline you run the risk that the Legal Directory researcher will not have enough time to gather sufficient feedback from your referees or give good consideration to your submission. If you are going to consult with others about your submission – internally or externally – don't produce your first draft on the deadline.

[References are king](#)

When clients are disappointed with a ranking we very often ask for feedback from the editor as to why they were not ranked/ranked higher. By some distance the answer we receive most often (particularly from Chambers) is that there was insufficient response from references.

Guidance: There are some differences in how the different directories deal with references and it is difficult to be too prescriptive. However, key points:

- Check references are willing before putting them forward and let them know when the directory is due to contact them and how (phone, email etc.)
- Put forward as many relevant references as you can – but **remember it is how many that respond not how many you put forward** that matters
- Not all references need to be clients – but they do need some reasonably recent insight into your work in the practice area being researched
- When sending references to Chambers, factor in that they will only contact a reference once in a 6 month period.

Submissions: focus on what matters

We were assisting a significant European law firm* when one of their departments came back to us with a draft Legal Directory submission that was over 80 pages long. Despite our protests that this was not appropriate and would not help their case, they insisted on submitting the very lengthy and wordy document, thinking that the complexity and detail would help strengthen their submission. The researcher assigned to them was, to put it mildly, unhappy and made it quite clear that she would read very little of the submission, meaning that hours of work had been wasted and the researcher may have missed the points that really mattered.

I have just read a draft submission a client has sent to us*. It starts with a profile of the senior partner and explains that he is the leading corporate lawyer in his jurisdiction. This is great stuff. However, the submission is for dispute resolution and it makes no mention of his practice in that area. It is not only irrelevant, it is counterproductive.

Guidance: Legal Directory researchers receive hundreds of submissions and see thousands of work highlights. Be concise, focus on what matters. Spend most of your time on **Work Highlights** and **Overview** sections. The rest of the submission is secondary.

Work Highlights:

- Should be from the last 12 months
- Get your point over but do not make descriptions too long. Very roughly, most work highlight descriptions should be around 100 words and only very complex/important ones should be more than 150. It is how good your description is, not how long, that counts
- Order the work highlights with the most significant first, as that increases the chances of the Legal Directory researchers having the time to read them in detail
- Explaining why the work was notable - significant/ground-breaking/unique/complex - is essential. Discuss specifically how/why your firm added value to the transaction/worked creatively/overcame challenges. Avoid a complicated or technical legal explanation
- Most of the fields are there for a reason – do your very best to complete them.

Overview:

An “Overview” section is included in each of the directory submission documents in order to set out a description of your department and the practice area being researched. The firm can include a wide range of information and content may vary. However, general guidance:

- Explain what is unique about this department compared to others in this practice area and highlight any significant developments in the past 12 months
- Remember that this is a marketing document so don't be shy! Explain why clients choose your firm and what makes the department stand out. Make key points first
- Keep it to the point and focussed on the practice area being researched. Do not include padding or information that is not relevant or interesting. Think hard before cutting and pasting lengthy general descriptions of the work you do from the website, or including swathes of information about the teams' academic career

- Subsections often include: The Practice/The Team/Clients/Press Coverage

Feedback on Current Rankings:

There are 2 aspects to this: a) comment on your own rankings; b) comment on other firms' rankings. Firms nearly always say they should be ranked higher and very often don't comment on other firms at all. However, if you can give some objective and insightful comment you should do so.

Getting Lawyers ranked:

Firms will often put individual lawyers forward for ranking in a particular practice area. However, when we look at the submission in more detail that lawyer does not feature in any of the work highlights and has not worked with any of the references. Please ensure that for any lawyers you put forward for a ranking you give examples of their work and provide referees who are able to give feedback on their work.

Confidentiality:

There are too many variables to go in to details here. However, many firms still give very little detail about their clients and the work they have done on grounds of confidentiality, and some more or less refuse to give any. Whereas we fully respect the importance of client confidentiality, and that it should take precedence over directory rankings, this will have a negative impact on your rankings and needs close consideration.

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** Examples are fictional, although facts described illustrative of actual events.*