



What Do Internet Lawyer Rating Sites Say About You?

By Christopher Hopkins, Chair, Law Office Technology Committee

Before any major purchase, chances are that you research your options on the Internet. This is not necessarily true for hiring lawyers. To date, potential clients and your competitors have had to rely on your website bio, news headlines or direct experience to learn about you – there is no Amazon-for-lawyers.com. Meanwhile, you are probably not doing yourself a favor with your own website – many law firm sites are bland and rarely updated. There are, however, independent sites which currently exist where anonymous self-described “clients” report their experiences with you. These sites can be difficult to find, much less verify, and often can be the source of harsh negative reviews which are difficult to cure.

U.S. News & World Reports seeks to solve that “problem” this October with “America’s Best Law Firms” which, like their law school rankings, will rank more than 5,000 law firms nationwide in 125 legal practice areas. Shortly thereafter, the “Best Law Firms to Work For” rankings are slated to be released in January 2011. See <http://bit.ly/ch7DT3> As of August 2010, a limited version of their internet search engine is available at the Best Lawyers’ website, <http://bit.ly/d9OKIz>, and reportedly will be fully functional by the time you read this article.

If the forthcoming *U.S. News* rankings of law firms become as widely read as their law school reviews, this could marginalize sites with “client” reviews and set the standards by which lawyers and firms may seek to improve their image. On the other hand, *U.S. News* rankings might only benefit larger firms and overlook the distinguishing characteristics of smaller firms which may be invisible in the rankings.

Very few bar associations and legal institutions seem thrilled with the prospect of legal rankings – while lawyers and firms are likely afraid *not* to

participate. As of mid-2010, nearly 25% of Florida lawyers had expanded profiles on the Bar website which listed, among other things, their Martindale Hubbell rating. In July 2010, the Florida Bar determined that it could not implicitly approve some, but not all, attorney rankings and therefore removed Martindale Hubbell ratings from attorney profiles on the Bar website. See <http://bit.ly/9TLImb> At that time, Florida Bar president Mayanne Downs acknowledged that there are at least 122 lawyer rating services.

Services which allow for “client” reviews have received an even harsher reception. The back-and-forth battle over Avvo.com lawyer ratings has been a dizzying process. Even if your practice does not engender itself to potential Avvo readers, be aware that Bar rules and Supreme Court opinions in this area could also affect comments posted on LinkedIn.com and LegalOnRamp.com. Moreover, as lawyers and firms turn to social networking sites, even comments posted on firm fan pages or the use of a “like” icon on Facebook could potentially trigger a Rule violation.

Shortly after Avvo.com arose in 2007, the Bar prohibited members from using Avvo ratings. In April 2008, the Bar committee reversed course, saying that Florida lawyers could reference Avvo ratings in advertisements. By September 2008, Avvo was once again determined to be outside the confines of Bar Rule 4-7.2 (testimonials in lawyer ads) and lawyers were not permitted to request clients publish evaluations online. See <http://bit.ly/aTAs1Y> After a legal challenge, new guidelines, and then a moratorium on the new guidelines, the traditional application of Bar Rule 4-7.2 does not appear to have embraced published social networking referrals or online attorney reviews.

This past July, the American Bar Association issued a 65-page report analyzing the *U.S. News* law school ranking list, noting that it “dominates the public discourse on how law schools compare to one another.” Not surprisingly,

the ABA concluded that the *U.S. News*’ ranking was helpful but “the most thorough and accurate information about law schools comes from the American Bar Association itself.” The ABA was further concerned that the *U.S. News* methodology emphasizes a limited number of factors and that, in the end, students might be selecting schools based upon the ranking number rather than “a nuanced understanding of differences among particular schools.”

These same criticisms will likely arise with the advent of *U.S. News* law firm rankings (other published ranking systems exist but *U.S. News* could be a significant inroad into broad consumer press). According to a *U.S. News* commentator, the magazine collected data directly from firms in addition to obtaining peer-review and over 50,000 client references. See <http://bit.ly/ch7DT3>. It may be interesting to inquire of colleagues and clients whether they have been approached for contribution (if this article is the first news of the forthcoming *U.S. News* rankings, that is probably not a good sign). Recall that *U.S. News* has modified its methodology for law schools rankings over the years so the first generation of results in this survey may fluctuate in future years.

Regardless of how lawyers may be able to use rankings or whether lawyers are permitted to encourage clients to publish comments, the problem remains that online reviews may exist about you. Negative comments will undoubtedly be shrouded behind anonymous posts or online pseudonyms. Lawyers are traditionally quite territorial about their reputations and the online sphere requires heightened attention to ensure your name is clear.

Scan the comment section underneath any item for sale on Amazon.com and you will generally see reviews bouncing from an aggressive one-star (my favorite, a March 2009 review of the Kindle e-reader entitled, “Product flawed – will probably die after 1 year”) to a glowing five-star (“Great in so many ways!!!”). Unlike reviews of the Kindle, which are positive by a ratio of 100:1, many Internet denizens allow their dark side to be emboldened behind

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Bulletin Board

BOCA RATON: Do you need a new FULL-TIME OFFICE or a PART-TIME/SATELLITE LOCATION WITH A CONFERENCE ROOM? 1-4 offices and secretarial/paralegal space available in law office/business suite in East Boca Raton. Use of internet, copier, fax, kitchen and conference room included. Referral opportunities available. Email ron@ricardolaw.com with "Boca Office" in subject line.

HEARSAY

Dennis P. Koehler, a Vietnam Veteran, recently received the VVA Commendation Medal, the highest individual honor awarded by the 62,000 member Vietnam Veterans of America, Inc. He was recognized for his 29-year membership in the VVA and tireless advocacy for America's veterans at the local, state and national levels.

The Law Firm of Kreuzler-Walsh, Compiani & Vargas, P.A. is pleased to announce that **Stephanie L. Serafin** formerly a Staff Attorney to Judge Dorian Damoorgian at the 4th DCA has become associated with the firm.

Richman Greer is pleased to announce that **Grasford W. Smith** was installed as President of the F. Malcolm Cunningham Sr. Bar Association for 2010-11.



Cyrus K. Toufanian is pleased to announce the opening of The Law Office of Cyrus K. Toufanian, P.A. at 1500 North Dixie Highway, Suite 204, West

Palm Beach 33401. (561) 628-6465. Mr. Toufanian practices in the areas of criminal defense and family law. www.cktlaw.com.

Joseph S. Karp has been elected President of the American Association of Trust, Estate Planning and Elder Law Attorneys (AATEELA). AATEELA is an invitation-only professional association of lawyers nationwide selected for their outstanding contributions to the fields of estate planning and elder law.

Jones, Foster, Johnston & Stubbs, P.A. announces that **C. Wade Bowden** has earned the distinction of Florida Bar Board Certified Business Litigation Attorney and **Mark H. Dahlmeier** has earned the distinction of Florida Bar Board Certified Real Estate Attorney.

Samantha Schosberg Feuer was installed as President of the Palm Beach County Chapter of the Florida Association for Women Lawyers.

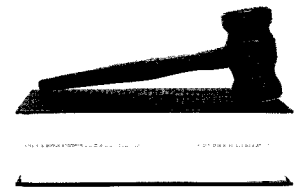


Andrea L. Johnson, Attorney at Law, P.A. will now be known as Andrea J. White, Attorney at Law, P.A. and will continue to offer legal services

throughout the Palm Beaches and the Treasure Coast. Andrea White was recently selected as the State Public Policy Chair for Business and Professional Women/Florida.

MISCELLANEOUS

LAW OFFICE FURNITURE AND EQUIPMENT FOR SALE: 3 dark wood secretary desks with returns, 1 secretary desk, no return. Lanier dictation equip., computer equipment. Misc. office furniture. Email wbmccall@aol.com.



Lawyer Rating Sites

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the keyboard, often due to anonymity and the absence of any authority, leading product and service reviews to be aflame with howling criticism. If that is true, has an unsatisfied client commented about you on the Internet?

To ensure the accuracy of your online reputation, it is advisable to first confirm that the Bar's website has accurate information (often, that is where the ratings sites "scoop" their primary data). Check your profile at <http://bit.ly/bafQDZ>. Next, run your name through the Best Lawyers site (above) and Avvo.com. Oddly enough, according to Avvo, 33% of my practice involves advertising which, in reality, arises far less frequently in my cases.

Google is, of course, a solid resource however you need to be aware that a "straight" Google search is not

enough. On the Google home page, go to the tab entitled, "more," in the upper left corner and run searches for [your first and last name + lawyer] through news, scholar, blogs, YouTube, and groups. Add words like "attorney," "bad," "avoid," and "reputation" to refine your search.

Other websites with lawyer rankings abound: rateapartner.com, lawyerratingz.com, lawyersreputation.com, lawyersearchguide.com, and ripoffreport.com. Finally, employment sites which offer forums also may also be laden with personal attacks (everything from craigslist.org to findlaw.com).

Christopher B. Hopkins is a shareholder with Akerman Senterfitt (Christopher.Hopkins@akerman.com).

Movie Tickets make great gifts for teachers, clients and staff!

The PBCBA has discount movie tickets available for its members. Remember, these tickets make great gifts for family, babysitters, staff, clients and end of the year gifts for teachers. Savings are available for the following theaters:

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- *Regal Theaters \$7.50 each (\$10.00 at box office)
- *Cobb Theatres \$7.50 each (\$10.00 at the box office)

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