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Business of Law: Law Broker Launches a Very Different Type of Lawyer's Directory

Is Rapoport's Directory the new kid on the block that could revolutionise smaller law firms' ability to find clients? Elizabeth Davidson speaks to Directory founder Yuri Rapoport

A new online lawyer's directory is offering promotional opportunities and a direct link to potential clients for small and medium sized law firms.

Rapoport's Directory—launched on a not-for-profit basis by Australian solicitor and law broker Dr Yuri Rapoport this summer—presents an agile addition to such traditional law library heavyweights as the Legal 500 and Chambers and Partners, which grade firms objectively according to size, reputation and quality of work.

It provides detailed, searchable information on lawyer's work with clients, their track record and the type of work handled. The information is uploaded by individual solicitors and barristers themselves, and can include the clients they have acted for and appeared against, type of work handled, outcome of matters, judges they have appeared before, and other facts that may be relevant to prospective clients. The information is uploaded on a free of charge basis, and is intended to be detailed and objective. The directory welcomes information from any lawyer, from sole practitioner to Magic Circle partner.

Where the directory breaks new ground is by targeting consumers as well as the profession—members of the public will be able to search for individual lawyers on the basis of their clients, work history and area of law.

Dr Rapoport says the idea for the directory sprang from his experience of law broking. He developed the concept of client referral network services or law broking in Australia, where he launched Prime Law Brokers in 1996 following reforms to the legal profession. Prime Law Brokers helps members of the public who have legal problems but no idea about how to find a suitable lawyer. It operates free of charge, matching clients with lawyers who have the appropriate experience for their case (rather than leaving them to randomly flip through telephone directories) and has so far made more than 400,000 referrals. Law firms pay a monthly fee to the brokers to stay on their books.

"I learned a lot of lessons from law broking about how to achieve the greatest satisfaction for clients," says Dr Rapoport. "One of the things that stood out, almost as a commercial secret among law brokers, was the ability to match clients to lawyers with prior experience in dealing with specific parties. A client wanting to sue a particular insurance company or bank, for example, would get a greater level of satisfaction as a rule if they were matched with a lawyer who had previous experience of dealing with that particular insurance company or bank because he or she would already have a familiarity with the opponent's strategies, their policies and their legal team. That made for a lot of advantages when commencing that case, and so the client would often see it resolved very quickly. Targeting the opponent with a lawyer who has already won against them in a case involving similar circumstances would make that opponent think there is no point in fighting the claim. After being contacted by a lawyer who had already won against them they are much more amenable to settlement or compromise."

He believes the directory will be a valuable promotional tool for solicitors and barristers in England and Wales as the profession gears up for the challenges of the Legal Services Act 2007, which will revolutionise the way law firms are owned and managed. Law firms could then potentially find themselves in competition with consumer-savvy businesses such as banks and supermarkets, who are adept at promoting themselves to the public.

"In line with the Legal Services Act and the way things are moving in the profession, we understand that this information would become a very valuable commodity or resource," he says.

"Previously we didn't have the internet, and this information was available only through a broker who would sell that information to the consumer."

The ability of the consumer to access the directory for themselves marks Rapoport's product out from more traditional directories such as Chambers and the Legal 500, which tend to be read by legal professionals. This is in line with current thinking on legal services reform, which emphasises the interests of the consumer, says Dr Rapoport. It also fits in with the expectations of consumers when accessing services in an age when information is readily available. Medical patients, for example, routinely scour the internet for information on symptoms and treatments, while price comparison sites for everything from flights to insurance proliferate.

Another drawback with traditional directories, according to Dr Rapoport, is that the smaller law firms find it harder to get listed. "That seems unfair," he says, "and those law firms that actually are listed are not really achieving much consumer exposure as these directories are really only for lawyers. This, on the other hand, is more of a forum that enables any lawyer irrespective of what firm they are practising at to simply go off and register their unique case experience.

"Consumers are getting a lot more savvy these days about buying products, and about the availability of information. They can pull information off the internet so the idea of having some promotional material thrust at them by a law firm is less likely to impress. They are more knowledgeable about how to find information."

Lawyers can upload their details to the site immediately. A consumer launch in the UK is scheduled to take place in October, once sufficient information has been added to the service. The directory is being launched in the UK and Australia first and, once it has bedded in successfully in these countries, Dr Rapoport plans to expand the service into the US and beyond.

While the directory offers great information-sharing opportunities, however, how can we be sure the information that is being published is objective?

According to Dr Rapoport, the level of information required should deter lawyers from exaggerating, making vague statements or simply making it up. While it is up to lawyers to add information about themselves, they must include details of each individual matter dealt with.

"We have had lawyers claiming experience in 50 cases and registering all of them, and some claiming hundreds of cases and registering none," he says. "Given the level of detail that lawyers enter about each case, it is very easy to see where a lawyer is making a grand claim or exaggerating. Lawyers can generalise about their experience in a Yellow Pages type of advert where they claim, for example, to have done hundreds of personal injury claims. But where

you juxtapose that with details of who they acted for, the area of law involved, where it was, and the outcome of the case, the information becomes more transparent. People can open up Yellow Pages and find all sorts of wonderful claims but these are the facts. I can't see lawyers sitting down for hours and making up claims. You can see that cases are true because of the level of detail."

One thing the directory will be avoiding, however, is making any comparison on fees.

"I'm a personal believer that information about fees can be very misleading, and we try to steer clear of that," says Dr Rapoport. "Depending on the lawyer's experience the fee could be low but they could end up charging more by taking longer, whereas another one would have charged a higher fee but saved time."

Dr Rapoport, who has existing business interests elsewhere, says the directory is "not a money-making exercise". Nor will it take work away from brokers, he says as there are always "consumers for whom brokers will be the first port of call".

"The fact it is free goes to the heart of its objectivity," he says. "I think this is the missing link in the marketplace, and it wouldn't work if there was a commercial basis to it.

"There are a lot of challenges that lawyers have to face in thinking about how to present their services, particularly where technology is involved. Lawyers weren't taught how to be business people and it was always their reputation that mattered when it came to developing their careers. Then they allowed lawyers to advertise in the mid-1980s and I think that that was the greatest travesty in the legal profession, because they threw out the value of reputation and established professional position, and all of a sudden we had savvy lawyers using modern advertising approaches and large budgets to promote themselves and that ultimately compromised consumer choice. The consumer would be blinded by the flashing lights of advertising and wouldn't see the experience and knowledge behind those firms that didn't have such large advertising budgets.

"Now, however, we are turning the clock back using the technology of the internet, which allows practitioners to demonstrate actual facts behind their claims and to establish the value of their reputations. They can showcase that information directly to the consumer. The future of legal services is that things have come full circle, and we are turning back to values that were more or less intrinsic to the profession."

Rapoport's Directory can be viewed online at www.rapoports.co.uk