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The right steps to place on the rankings

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Five years ago, when Burson-Marsteller started tracking "Best of..." and "Top 100..." corporate scorecard features, the agency followed less than 100 rankings.

Today, Burson's executive positioning group specializes in pitching clients to more than 300 rankings - and not just in the US, but China, Germany, UK, and various other countries.

Carol Ballock, an MD in Burson's corporate practice, says that rather than zero in on a single survey, she often suggests that her clients approach the entire rankings environment. This includes developing content that can be repurposed across multiple submissions, which increases the likelihood of success.

"We've also noticed some companies are too modest on initial applications, due in part to inexperience," Ballock adds. She advises reviewing past rankings, reaching out to the compilation staff early, and really submerging oneself in the publication overall. Also, it's important to think long-term, by submitting over the course of multiple years, continually enhancing submissions, and not growing frustrated with snubs or complacent with victories, she adds.

Ultimately, Ballock says, the investment in developing high-quality submissions, including associated collateral, produces material that can be used for other purposes, especially if your client does win and needs to brand the win across everything the company does, "like a straight-A report card you get to show off all year long."

While there are several established ratings that PR pros focus on, it's also important to seek out new rankings. For example, Meghan Sager, account navigator at HCD Advertising & PR, nabbed a spot on *Men's Fitness* magazine's inaugural "15 Fittest Companies in America" in February, for client Wheeler Interests, alongside the likes of Google, PepsiCo, and Verizon.

"Be honest," Sager says. "If your company is not the 'Best Place to Work' or 'Top 100' in [its] field, then don't pitch [it] as one."

Wheeler Interests, a small commercial real estate company headquartered in Virginia Beach with 32 employees, had just moved into a new headquarters, providing employees with free access to a gym that was being leased on the first floor.

"If the list doesn't have an application, call the publication and find out who is compiling and deciding on the list and how they want nominees to submit," Sager adds.

It's also important to understand the methodology. Criteria are usually posted on a Web site and might exclusively focus on data.

For example, in the hotel industry, getting named to *Hotel Business*' "Top 100 Hotel Management Companies in the Nation" is a big deal, but the ranking is based on gross annual revenue from the previous year.

"Still, every year, I am surprised how many PR people call or e-mail to ask how to get a client ranked," says Chris Ostrowski, managing editor. "The fine print is not that fine. But don't automatically assume you are excluded. It is a Top 100, but it's not like we receive a million submissions."

Sometimes criteria extend beyond data and can be more subjective.

"I get two or three calls from PR people each week, half a dozen e-mail requests, all wanting to know how they can get into the next technology report, and [the] answer is always the same," says Larry Rout, senior editor at *The Wall Street Journal*. "Targeting the special reports is like asking how you can get your client on A1. That's not how it works."

Rout advises investing time in building relationships with beat reporters, who are the most influential advocates for which company or person gets included.

It's most important not to fudge the details.

"Make sure you get everything correct in your pitch," Sager notes. "If you end up getting number one on a list, you can bet that number two will find out if you reported incorrect information."

Technique Tips

Do

- Be honest about your workplace
- Understand the criteria. Some rankings are statistically driven
- Publicize your win to all audiences

Don't

- Embellish - if you win, it's likely you'll be found out
- Stray beyond submission guidelines
- Overlook newer rankings and lists