

WASHINGTON LAW & POLITICS

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Ratings Wars

SETTLING THE SCORE

Browne and Wenokur et al. v. Avvo, Britton et al.

Pick a number between one and 10. That's about how much credence some attorneys give to Avvo, a controversial new Seattle-based Web site that rates lawyers.

"It's willy-nilly," claims Steve Berman, with Hagens Berman Sobol Shapiro. At site rollout, one former state Supreme Court justice had a lower rating than a disbarred attorney. Another lawyer raised his score by listing softball awards on his entry. A little more than a week after the Web site's June debut, Berman was filing a class-action suit against Avvo, with two Washington attorneys named as plaintiffs: Alan Wenokur and John Henry Browne.

Browne's Avvo rating—which was 5.2 (it has since gone up to 5.6)—may reflect in part a disciplinary action by the state Bar over a compensation issue. The widely respected criminal defense lawyer called the Web site a "joke" in a *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* story. The suit claims the site violated the state's Consumer Protection Act because it "isn't a true representation of one's ability to practice law and deliver positive results to their client," Berman, who rates 9.9 out of 10 on the service, said in a press release.

Hogwash, says Avvo co-founder Mark Britton, former general counsel at Expedia. "We are bringing to light a lot of information the consumers didn't have. We are shining a flashlight into dark areas that some lawyers didn't want illuminated." At the same time, Avvo doesn't want to shed light on the guts of its ratings system. "We don't reveal our algorithm," Britton says. "We want to get it patented, and we don't want any lawyers 'gaming' the system." The secret algorithm gives lawyers a numerical rating and offers reviews by both clients and colleagues.

"We've had an outpouring of support from lawyers who think this [the rating system] is unfair," says Berman. Britton counters, "All we're doing is reflecting what can be found at the state Bar, or on their Web sites. We're just saving the consumers hours of searching." Avvo changed its Web site in late June, removing numerical rankings for lawyers when it had limited information from the state Bar. Britton says just under 4,000 lawyers in Avvo's current market—nine states and the District of Columbia—have registered with Avvo, giving their credit-card numbers and verifying their information. He says notations

Lawsuits of the Year

of non-law-related awards get weeded out of the rankings by Avvo staff. The suit, filed in federal district court in Seattle, is awaiting a decision on a motion by Avvo to dismiss on First Amendment grounds.

(Key Professional Media, parent company of WL&P, publishes attorney-ratings listings called *Super Lawyers* in markets throughout the country.)

—Bob Geballe



COURTESY SACHIN BHARTIA, AVVO

Britton



ANIN CHASE

Berman