

Special section recognizes this year's top franchise attorneys

Articles by Joe Halpern, Alyssa Huglen, Matthew Liedke, Laura Michaels and Emilee Wentland; survey and research by Jenny Raines

The potential passage of landmark federal legislation is on the minds of many franchise-focused attorneys, but it's not the only matter on the radar for the 2026 class of Legal Eagles.

These top lawyers, compiled by Franchise Times in its annual list after a nomination process, were involved in a variety of cases in the past year and are tracking several trends. Those lawyers work in practices in the United States and Canada, assisting franchisors and franchisees alike through litigation, transactions and with general counsel matters.

Legal Eagles have been speaking with clients about the growing usage of artificial intelligence and what that means for franchisors as well as operators. The subject is covered in one of several articles throughout this special section, with others detailing the ins and outs of M&A transactions and advice for franchisees considering formation of an independent association.


The American Franchise Act, though, is perhaps the most talked about law issue for the Legal Eagles, and several weighed in on what to expect from the legislation, as well as other federal possibilities. Coverage also extends to bills moving through state legislatures, and how they may impact franchising and the third-party seller and broker community.

In addition to reporting by the Franchise Times editorial team, featured attorneys shared their opinions through our annual survey.

Through their responses, the field's top attorneys describe the biggest legal trends of 2026, recent notable cases, how they handle bankruptcy situations and the legal issues they believe more people need to know about (think vendor rebate programs, state franchise relationship laws and data privacy).

They also offer guidance on franchise disclosure document renewals and lesser-known legal topics.

Plus, find out which attorneys made their way into the Hall of Fame this year, and who made the list for the first time.

Congratulations to this year's Legal Eagles. 

—Matthew Liedke

Table of Contents:

U.S. Legal Eagles	32
Federal Regulations	33
What's Trending	37
Legal Eagles Canada	39
New Class & Hall of Fame	41
Artificial Intelligence	42
Best Legal Lessons	44
Franchisee Associations	45
Interesting Legal Cases	46
State Legislation	49
Legal Topics to Know	50
Mergers & Acquisitions	52
Capitol Hill Predictions	54
Managing Bankruptcies	56
FDD Reviews	58
Franchise Broker Disclosure	60



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ZEE Franchisees ZOR Franchisors L Litigation T Transactional



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Matt Kreutzer is a top-notch franchise attorney with extensive expertise in franchise law. Whether you're just starting out or already established, Matt is your go-to for developing, protecting, and licensing your franchise and distribution systems.

Matt offers a full range of services, from navigating nationwide franchising laws and regulations to crafting essential documents like contracts and Franchise Disclosure Documents. With Matt on your team, you'll be well-prepared to handle state regulatory inquiries and secure exemptions.

What really sets Matt apart is his deep experience in franchise litigation. He guides clients through litigation and alternative dispute resolution, always aiming for the best possible outcome under the circumstances. Matt understands the risks in franchise relationships and works hard to mitigate them, so you can focus on growing your brand.

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Jonathan Koudelka is a seasoned Franchise and Business Attorney with more than fifteen years of in-house experience guiding emerging and established franchise systems through every stage of their lifecycle. As the founder of Koudelka Law, based near Ann Arbor, Michigan, he now provides strategic legal counsel to franchisors, private equity groups, and closely held businesses.

While Jonathan provides a full suite of traditional legal services, his true specialty lies in integrating the scalable systems and workflows he developed in-house into the operations of emerging brands. This unique, process-driven approach strengthens compliance, improves efficiency, and positions growing franchisors for long-term success. He is committed to helping franchisors build stronger, more resilient systems that support both rapid expansion and long-term stability.

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Tal Grinblat is a California Bar Certified Specialist in Franchise and Distribution Law with over 25 years of experience advising franchisors and franchisees. He represents clients in franchise system structuring, Franchise Disclosure Documents and agreements, qualifying for exemptions, and resolving franchise relationship issues.

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Julie Lusthaus has been practicing franchise law for over 25 years, representing both franchisors and franchisees.

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Ritchie leads Manning Fulton's franchise practice, providing innovative strategic counsel to franchise systems through all phases of growing and protecting their brands.

Ritchie's clients benefit from his wealth of experience representing both sector-leading franchisors as well as innovating emerging concepts. From launching their franchise system to navigating a successful business sale, franchisors and multi-unit franchisees alike rely on his timely, practical counsel.

Learn how Manning Fulton can help your brand by visiting www.manningfulton.com.

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Jason M. Murray practices in the area of franchise and distribution law and provides counsel and assistance with creating, managing, licensing, protecting, and enforcing franchised business relationships, product distribution systems, and dealership networks. His franchise and distribution law practice specifically relates to licensing and development, regulation and compliance, and dispute resolution through mediation, arbitration, and litigation. Jason's litigation experience consists of general commercial litigation in state and federal courts, including franchise and distribution law, intellectual property, and real property matters. He also serves as an arbitrator and is a member of the American Arbitrator Association Commercial Arbitrator Panel. Jason has an AV Preeminent rating as independently determined by Martindale-Hubbell®, has been selected by his peers for *Florida Super Lawyers*®, and selected for inclusion in the peer-rated *Best Lawyers in America*® for work in the areas of franchise law and commercial litigation. He is also a frequent author and presenter on franchise law topics.

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