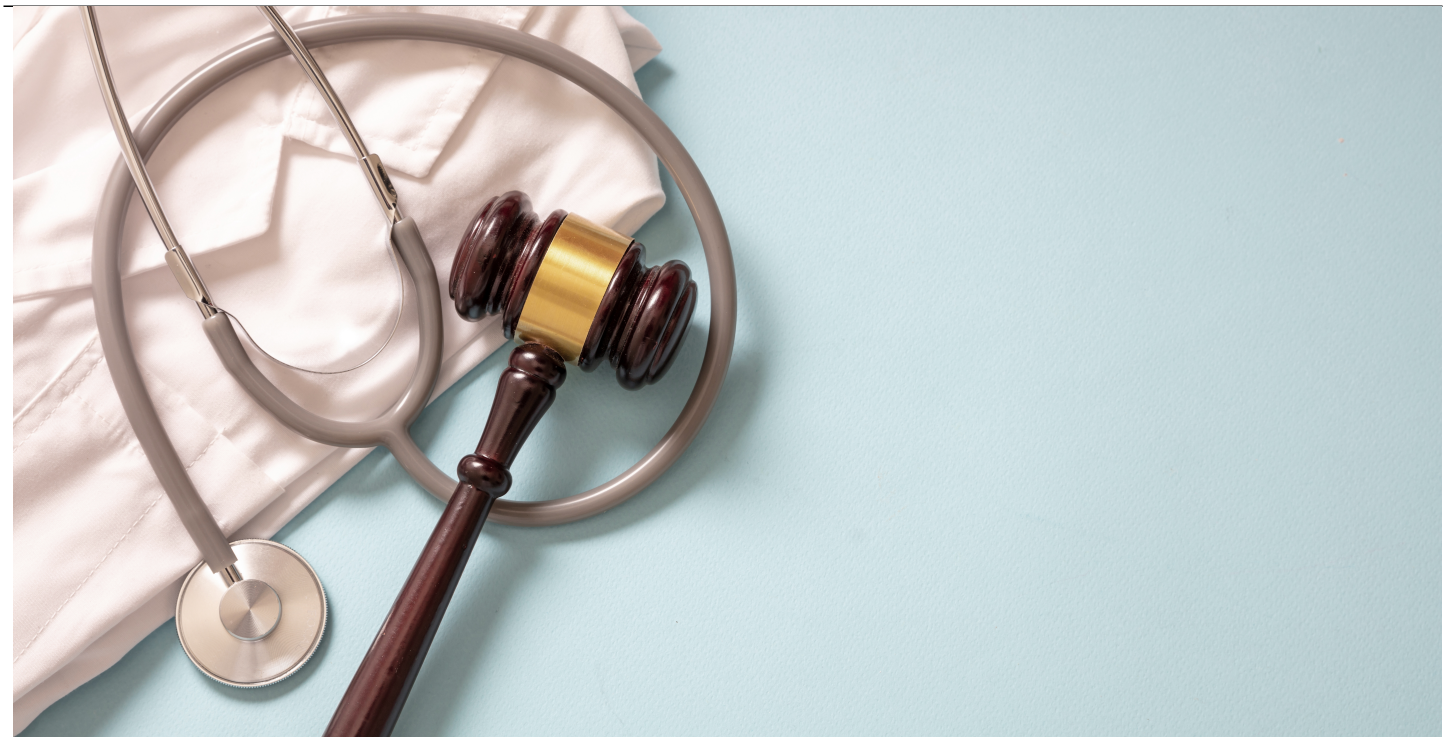


Empowering Your Lawyer Brand: From Doctor Know to Doctor How (Part 1: In-house Lawyers)

Career Development



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One defining trait of a strong lawyer brand is being seen as a “Doctor How.” A Doctor How is a lawyer — whether at a firm or in-house — who listens actively, leads with empathy, and applies sound judgment to solve problems and drive the business forward. Conversely, a “Doctor Know,” is a lawyer who is perceived as taking a more legalistic and less pragmatic approach. Over the course of their careers, lawyers who focus on brand-building often evolve from being seen as a Doctor Know to a Doctor How. Businesses inherently assume risk every day just by operating. Lawyers can become a Doctor How by understanding the company’s risk appetite and tailoring advice to offer practical, business-minded, and risk-calibrated solutions.

In this two-part article, former General Counsel Judith McKay and Bindu Cudjoe, former Chief Legal Officer, Corporate Secretary, and ACC Board member — now principals of their own consulting firms, share practical tips to help you shift how you’re perceived as a lawyer so that your full value is recognized.



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Part 1 focuses on in-house lawyers and Part 2 will focus on law firm lawyers. The overall theme of these two articles is that in-house and external counsel, working together, can leverage their complementary skills to strengthen one another's contributions and deepen each of their Doctor How reputations.

How can in-house lawyers shape their brand to be seen as "Doctor How"?

Within in-house teams, the shift from Doctor Know to Doctor How positions lawyers as problem-solvers and trusted business partners. Rising in-house counsel needs to be known for helping business partners navigate complex or ambiguous situations to reach their goals — not just for answering narrowly framed legal questions or purely providing their legal opinion. This requires leveraging the in-house counsel's complete toolkit of legal skills, augmented by law firm counsel as needed, combined with a deep understanding of the business ecosystem and drivers. It takes courage and judgement to make the call on the best course of action, since there are rarely any perfect solutions — and certainly only ones with only legal implications.

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Being seen as a Doctor How enables in-house counsel to be a go-to trusted advisor to the business, enhancing their presence and contributions to strategic and operational discussions. With time and experience, their skill sets, judgement, and perspectives become sought after. This helps them get involved earlier in the process, so the in-house team isn't seen as the final checkpoint — or worse, a blocker — on the path to execution. Below are some recommended actions, based on years of experience, to help in-house counsel shift perceptions:

In Case You Missed It: Elevating In-house and Outside Counsel Partnerships for Better Collaboration

Embed yourself in every aspect of the business

Embed yourself in the business on a regular basis, whether sitting in the same area as your business colleagues, touring your company's facilities, tagging along on sales calls, or picking the brains of company leaders on key players and market activity. There is nothing like hands-on experience to build your business understanding — and for your interest and commitment to be seen by your business colleagues.

Learn to speak the language of business, rather than the language of law

Sharpen your financial acumen by seeking learning opportunities to gain a basic understanding of finance. Ask your CFO to walk you through the company financial statements. Businesses communicate by numbers more than words, so fluency in financial language is key to being seen as a business leader.

Lead projects that have company-wide strategic impact

Put your hand up to get involved in strategic problems, even those without a significant legal component. Apply your enterprise-wide view of the organization that cuts across business and operational lines to bring an integrated perspective. This new hat as a business project leader will help you be seen in a different light by your business colleagues.

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Gain perspective beyond the legal world

Join an industry association to gain important connections and build knowledge about the industry at large. Be seen as someone who understands industry trends and synthesizes knowledge into insights and action. The more you step out of the paradigm of an ivory tower lawyer, the more your

colleagues' perceptions about your role will shift.

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2026 ACC Legal Ops Con, April 20-22, in Chicago, IL, USA

Build your network by adding value to your target audience

Don't lose sight of your external profile just because you are in-house. Having a strong external profile enhances your internal reputation and opens up new insights and opportunities. Let people in your network know you are open to collaboration opportunities: this will open the door to participation in panels, webinars, and other thought leadership opportunities to increase your market profile.

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How can in-house and law firm lawyers help each other become "Doctor How"?

Stronger collaboration between external and in-house counsel can help both move from being seen as a Doctor Know to a Doctor How.

In-house counsel often have deeper insight into the business, offering context on specific issues and the organization's risk appetite. External counsel bring a cross-sector perspective, drawing on market trends and experiences with other clients in similar situations.

When they work together effectively, they provide a complete picture that adds significant value to the business and strengthens both of their Doctor How reputations. They can also help elevate one another's brands by generously providing opportunities to build their market profile and grow their careers.

The possibilities are endless when lawyers support each other!

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authors, its authors' employers, its sponsors, and/or ACC. These resources are not intended as a definitive statement on the subject addressed. Rather, they are intended to serve as a tool providing practical guidance and references for the busy in-house practitioner and other readers.

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Bindu Cudjoe is the Principal & Strategic Advisor of Bindustries Consulting, and a former executive and chief legal officer in the complex and highly regulated financial services industry as well as a former law firm partner. Bindustries Consulting helps law firms and organizations understand the art of the possible and reimagine what you can do — with bold thinking, governance and risk expertise and the insights of a general counsel and client of 200+ law firms.

Judith McKay



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Judith McKay is the Principal & Strategic advisor at JEM3 Consulting where she draws from her unique law firm and client-side experience to help firms unlock business opportunities, deepen client connections, and amplify their voice in the market. Previously, she served as chief client and innovation officer at a firm of over 800 lawyers, where she helped drive revenue growth and expand

the firm’s client base. She also served as vice president and general counsel at a global subsidiary of a Fortune 50 company.