Purpose of Case Interviews

A case interview is a type of interview in which the candidate is presented with a business problem and must walk the employer through their strategy to solve the issue. Case interviews are typically conducted in the consulting industry, but case questions are gaining popularity in other industries as well. The objective of a case interview is not to determine if the candidate gets the right answer but rather to evaluate the process the candidate employs to structure a competent approach to derive a solution. In other words, the company is far less interested in what you think than how you think.

The information found in this guide is primarily adapted from Case in Point by Marc Cosentino.

Interviewers are testing the candidate’s:

- Analytical ability
- Ability to think logically
- Structure and thought process
- Tolerance for ambiguity and data overload
- Poise and communication skills under pressure and in front of a client
- Creativity
- Industry and firm “fit”
- Listening skills
- Enthusiasm and self-confidence
- Drive and achievement

Candidates who receive offers are:

- Able to be a team player
- Demonstrate success-oriented behavior
- Able to exhibit good analytical skills when answering case questions
- Able to explain their thoughts, create a positive presence, and defend themselves without being defensive
- Calm, articulate, and professional under pressure
- Able to convince the interviewer they are committed to consulting
- Organizing the information effectively and developing a logical framework for analysis
- Stating assumptions clearly
- Comfortable discussing multifunctional aspects of the case
- Trying to quantify their response at every opportunity
- Displaying business sense
- Thinking creatively

Remember: Remember in order to nail a case interview, you need to know how to prepare and how to perform. Consultants get paid to solve business problems logically and creatively before people of power and influence.
The Interview

According to Cosentino, there are three main tests that you must pass in the case interview: the **airport test**, the **maturity test**, and the **case question**.

### The Airport Test

The interviewer is asking himself/herself, “If I were stuck in a 9-hour layover in Topeka, would I go nuts if this person is the only person I have to talk to?” Remember to be yourself: be personable, be memorable, and show your sense of humor and fun side. They want to know if they can handle working with you as much as you can handle the job. Interviewers remember stories and accomplishments more than generic or common answers.

### The Maturity Test

The interviewer will also be assessing your level of maturity. They want to determine whether or not they will be comfortable taking you in front of an important client. Be sure to present yourself professionally through your appearance and verbal and non-verbal communication. Be flexible, attentive, and open to questions, and take responsibility for any missteps you may take in your answers. Think before you speak.

### The Case Question

The next section covers different types of case questions you might encounter in an interview situation. Generally speaking, you will be asked to “solve” a business problem. As we have said and will continue to say, it’s much less about getting the right answer and more about thinking clearly and logically in a way that is impressive to interviewers.
Types of Case Interview Questions

There are three main types of case interview questions. Remember that there are many different variations on these types, and there are no guarantees as to what kind of case you will receive. Your best approach should be to expose yourself to as many different kinds of questions as possible so that there is a lower chance that you will be surprised by something in your interview.

[Adapted from Case in Point by Marc Cosentino and The Vault Guide to the Case Interview.]

Case Interview or “Business Case”

Although there are many different variations on this theme, the most common type is known as the business case. In this type of interview, the interviewer will present you with a business problem or scenario and then ask you to analyze and evaluate the situation and make recommendations. For example, the interviewer may present you with a business that is troubled by falling revenues. You would then ask questions about the industry, competitors, market share, etc., to get to the root of the problem. The interviewer is interested not only in your answer but also in how you got there. Therefore, it is important that you maintain a clear and logical thought process throughout the entire interview.

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<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Operations</th>
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<tr>
<td>Entering a new market</td>
<td>Increasing sales</td>
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<td>Mergers and acquisitions</td>
<td>Reducing costs</td>
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<td>Developing a new product</td>
<td>Improving profits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pricing strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Growth strategies</td>
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<td>Starting a new business</td>
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<td>Competitive response</td>
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Guesstimates or Estimating Cases

These are commonly referred to as “back-of-the-envelope” calculations, because the interviewer will require you to use common sense and your own knowledge to estimate a certain figure. An example of a question you could be asked is, “How many pizzas are consumed per capita, annually, in the United States?” This problem could be tackled in a number of different ways, but the point is that you will be required to make a number of assumptions, such as the number of people in the US, the average number of pizzas consumed by certain age groups, the number of slices in the average pizza, etc. While it is not necessary to get the answer exactly right, you should come close. You will likely be asked to think aloud, because interviewers want to understand how you arrived at your answer and how well you can defend it. Visit the Consulting Recruiting page of the Career Management website for more information on key figures that are beneficial to memorize and can help you answer questions where estimates are required (my.mccombs.utexas.edu/My/BBA/Career-Services/Consulting%20Recruiting).

Brain Teasers

These are logic games and puzzles that can appear in a number of different types and styles. Sometimes, the interviewer will time you to put you under additional pressure. As previously stated, the idea is to make your thought process as clear as possible. The following are example brain teasers:

- Why are manhole covers round?
- A windowless room has three light bulbs. You are outside the room with three switches, each controlling one of the light bulbs. If you can only enter the room one time, how can you determine which switch controls which light bulb?
The Case Commandments
[Adapted from *Case in Point* by Marc Cosentino.]

1. **Listen to the Question**: Listening is the most important skill a consultant has.
2. **Take Notes**: Taking notes during the case interview allows you to check back with the facts of the case; as someone once said, “The palest ink is stronger than the best memory.”
3. **Summarize the Question**: After you are given the question, take a moment to summarize the highlights out loud.
4. **Verify the Objective(s)**: Even if the objectives seem obvious, clarify. For example, “One objective is to increase sales. Are there any other objectives I should know about?”
5. **Ask Clarifying Questions**: When you’re starting out with the case, you can and should ask broad questions about the company, the industry, etc. Once the case has started to get underway, however, you should start asking more specific questions so the interviewer does not think that you are trying to get him or her to answer the case for you. You want to ask questions in order to: 1) get additional information; 2) show the interviewer that you aren’t shy about asking questions in tough situations; 3) turn the question into a dialogue, so that you aren’t just giving a five-minute monologue.
6. **Organize Your Answer**: Identify and label your case, and then lay out your structure.
7. **Hold That Thought**: The interviewer wants you to think out loud, but think before you speak so you don’t say ridiculous things.
8. **Manage Your Time**: Your answer should be as linear as possible; don’t get bogged down with the details.
9. **By the Numbers**: If possible, try to work numbers into your problem.
10. **Be Coachable**: Listen to and watch the interviewer’s feedback to determine if you are on the right track, boring, enthralling, etc.
11. **Be Creative and Brainstorm**: Don’t be afraid to think about ideas without having to commit yourself to them. Show the interviewer that you are creative and can think “outside the box.”
12. **Exude Enthusiasm and a Positive Attitude**: Remember that you must “rip through the case” and be excited about it; it’s not enough to get it right, you have to get a thrill from the act of solving it.
13. **Bring Closure and Summarize**: Review your findings, restate your suggestions, and make a recommendation. You don’t need to sum up the whole answer; pick two or three key points and touch on those.

**Approaching a Case**
The following approach can help you understand and thoroughly answer a case question:

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<th>Framing</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
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<td>• Identify key issues to solve the problem&lt;br&gt;• Prioritize issues and form a logical action plan&lt;br&gt;• Consider using a framework to organize your thoughts&lt;br&gt;• Verify the objective&lt;br&gt;<strong>Example frameworks</strong>: SWOT Analysis, 5 Forces, 5 Cs, 4 Ps, Decision Trees</td>
<td>• Dig deep enough to find detailed information for a meaningful answer&lt;br&gt;<strong>Tips</strong>: &lt;br&gt;• Keep framework in mind&lt;br&gt;• Use round numbers and do math on paper&lt;br&gt;• Draft your analysis on paper</td>
<td>• Draw conclusions from facts&lt;br&gt;• Identify key implications and next steps&lt;br&gt;<strong>Tips</strong>: &lt;br&gt;• Summarize &amp; provide a structured recommendation from analysis&lt;br&gt;• Don’t waver; confidently support your answers with enthusiasm</td>
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Mistakes to Avoid

For your reference, below are a few common mistakes made by interviewees.

[Adapted from *Case in Point* by Marc Cosentino.]

**The Late Night Talk Show Syndrome**

A five-minute monologue will do more to hurt your career than any of the other mistakes. Remember, you ask questions not only to get additional information, but also to draw the interviewer into the case with you. Make the interviewer feel that she is a stakeholder in your candidacy. Turn the question into a conversation.

**What Was the Question Again?**

Listen to the question; write it down; then repeat it to the interviewer. Candidates are always answering the wrong question because they don’t take the time to identify what the interviewer is really asking. Listen to the question.

**Explosion of the Mouth**

Many candidates try to give the answer quickly. Slow down. Don’t jump off the mark and give the first answer that pops into your head. Take your time and analyze the information. The interviewer is there to observe the logic and thought process behind your answer.

**Digression City**

You go off on a tangent because it’s easy, you’re on a roll, and it provides you with a false sense of security. You think it hides the fact that you can’t move forward in your answer, but it doesn’t. Tangents take you off the path, and then it becomes extremely difficult to get back on task. Your goal should be to focus on identifying the problem and providing general solutions. For example, you could spend 15 minutes thinking of promotion ideas for a specific product that the company in question carries, but that’s not the point. Remember to answer the question that has been given to you, and keep moving forward until you have found an answer.

**Buzzword Bingo**

Don’t use terms that you don’t understand fully. Throwing out a buzzword or business term in the wrong context highlights the fact that you have an unfortunate habit of discussing things that you know little about. If you do that in an interview, what will you do in front of a client?

**Asking Open-ended Questions**

Open-ended questions that try to get the interviewer to answer the case for you will definitely irritate the interviewer. It is far better to make assumptions than to ask the interviewer for the answer. An example when reviewing labor costs:

*Right:* Because the economy is strong and there are plenty of jobs, I’ll assume that our labor costs have gone up.

*Wrong:* What has been going on with our labor costs?

**Silence**

Silence is okay when you are doing something like calculating, writing down your thoughts, or drawing a graph or decision tree. You can get up to 40 seconds of silence before the “awkward” clock starts ticking. It is not okay if the interviewer gives you the case and you just sit there thinking. Remember, summarizing the question fills the gap of silence between the end of their question and the beginning of your answer.
How to Prepare

Case interviews are the most difficult kind of interview that you will face, so it will be important for you to walk into your interview as prepared as you possibly can be. Below are suggestions for how you can develop your case interviewing skills.

**Find a strategy that works for you.**

Read as many books on case interviewing that you have time for, and figure out which strategy fits best with your personality type and which you’re most comfortable with. You may end up with a synthesis of many different strategies, and that’s a good thing. Just make sure that you have your method and can apply it to whatever case comes your way.

**Study a few different consulting frameworks and techniques.**

These frameworks include, but are not limited to: The Five C’s (Company, Costs, Competition, Consumer, and Channels), The Four P’s (Product, Price, Place, and Promotions), The BCG Matrix, and Michael Porter’s “Five Forces”. Remember, the more tools you have at your disposal when you interview, the better off you’ll be.

**Work through as many cases as you can get your hands on.**

The more exposure you have to these kinds of problems, the more comfortable you will be during your interview. You also shouldn’t discount the importance of confidence in interviews; you’ll do better if you believe that you will do well. Even if you are uncertain, you need to remain confident.

**Find a partner to work with.**

You will need someone to work through the cases with you, so it will be in your best interest to find someone that is willing to help you. Sometimes it is best to find someone that is a year younger or older than you that is not competing for the same jobs. This will ease tensions between the two of you and you can genuinely draw on each others’ experiences. Ask around in your student organizations and classes to find partners.

**Work on your mental math.**

You should expect to face a few tough mental math questions in your course of interviewing, so it is in your best interest to find the mental math strategies that can best help you to determine what percentage 9 is of 82, what 6 divided by 17 is, and other tough questions. Use mental math in your everyday experiences instead of using a calculator. Download mental math apps to your phone and spend a few minutes each day practicing.

**Review the basic mechanics of financial statements.**

This is not a technical finance interview, but it will be important for you to understand what is going on with businesses, what drives profits, and the different sources of expenses a company has. Often, knowing about the income statement can lead you to the answer a case is getting at.

**Familiarize yourself with what is and has been going on with the markets and the economy in general.**

You won’t need to know the trading prices of specific stocks, but it might benefit you to know generally what oil has been doing for the past six months or recent economic trends. If the answer to your case has more to do with the industry than the company specifically, it will definitely help you to know about the business environment the company is operating in.

**Familiarize yourself with virtual case interviews.**

In a virtual interview, the interviewer can see your face but may not be able to see what you write. There are a few different strategies that you can use depending on your budget:
- Use a clipboard. Ever so often hold up the clipboard and show the interviewer what you have written to discuss it. Practice this on camera before your interview because it’s all going to be reversed on the screen.
- Purchase a document camera, which is a mounted camera system that records a video feed of your notepad as you are writing. With a document camera, you put your pad of paper below the camera are able to write normally.
- The interviewer might have a digital whiteboard for you to write on. There may be less space on the digital whiteboard, so you should use your paper to take notes and the whiteboard for your problem solving (adapted from [www.caseinterview.com](http://www.caseinterview.com)).
Resources for Preparation

Websites
The following websites have additional information to help you prepare:

- **Case Questions** by *Case in Point* author, Marc Cosentino. This interactive site allows you to practice many types of case questions. Access the site through the Career Management site (https://my.mccombs.utexas.edu/My/BBA/Career-Services/Consulting%20Recruiting).


- **Case Interview Secrets** (www.caseinterview.com) includes workshop videos from former McKinsey Associate and Case Interviewer, Victor Cheng.

- **Crack the Case System Videos** (www.mbacase.com/videos/) provides a variety of case starts and coaching videos from David Ohrvall, a former consultant with Bain and Company.

- **Employer websites** can provide valuable insight. Many consulting firms have case interview preparation resources published on their websites.

Visit the Career Management website and go to the Consulting Recruiting page for links to various web resources, including some employer sites with case prep resources.

Books
The following books provide additional detailed, in-depth information to help you prepare:

- **Case in Point: Complete Case Interview Preparation** by Marc P. Cosentino
- **Crack the Case System: How to Conquer Your Case Interviews** by David Ohrvall
- **Case Interview Secrets** by Victor Cheng
- **How to Get Into the Top Consulting Firms: A Surefire Case Interview Method** by T. Darling
- **The McKinsey Way** by Ethan Rasiel
- **The McKinsey Mind: Understanding and Implementing the Problem-Solving Tools and Management Techniques of the World’s Top Strategic Consulting Firm** by Ethan Rasiel
- **Case Interview Questions for Tech Companies: 155 Real Interview Questions and Answers** by Lewis Lin