The Case Interview

The case interview is a discussion, between the interviewer and the interviewee, on a real or hypothetical business or non-business scenario. Through this process, the interviewer intends to assess the interviewee’s analytical and people skills in handling realistic situations. These interviews, while being most common in the consulting industry and in strategy consulting in particular, are not limited only to the consulting industry. You are liable to come across these interviews, from time to time, in other industries as well.

The case interview approach provides the interviewer insights into your thinking process for problem solving. Problem solving is often independent of your expertise in any industry - expertise in an industry simply gives you additional knowledge, which can be acquired later, when needed. The interviewer is interested in: your expertise in general business, ability and creativity to analytically apply your learning from formal education and work experience, and raw intelligence. Problem solving is a learnable skill, so the interviewer is assessing whether the "acceptable raw material" is there, on which the prospective firm should invest for further development, to capture lucrative rewards.

Example Consulting Case Interview
http://youtu.be/--qrfJ2Gb8M

AceTheCase.com Case Interview Preparation
http://youtu.be/ZeiCJP04F8

Mastering the Case Interview
http://www.quintcareers.com/case_interviews.html

Case Interview, McKinsey

Preparing for the Case Interview with Deloitte

Bain and Company

BCG Prep
http://www.bcg.com/join_bcg/interview_prep/default.aspx

Vault's Video Guide to Management Consulting Interviews
http://youtu.be/FQUcoun99Vk

Case in Point: Complete Case Interview Preparation, by Marc P. Cosentino. Burgee Press. Available in the Center for Engineering Career development

Glassdoor.com
Find jobs and see company salaries, reviews, and interviews – all posted anonymously by employees.
http://www.glassdoor.com/index.htm
Case Preparation

Listen to the Question
Listening is the most important skill a consultant has. The case isn’t about you or the consultant, it’s about the client. What are they really asking for? Pay particular attention to the last sentence– one word can change the entire case.

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." If you blank out, all the information is right in front of you.

Summarize the Question
After you are given the question, take a moment to summarize the highlights out loud:
- It shows the interviewer that you listened
- It allows you to hear the information again
- It keeps you from answering the wrong question
- It fills the otherwise awkward pause when you’re trying to think of something intelligent to say

Verify the Objective(s)
Professional consultants always ask their clients to verify their objective(s). Even if the objectives seem obvious, there could be an additional underlying objective. When the objective seems apparent, phrase the questions differently: "One objective is to increase sales. Are there any other objectives I should know about?"

Ask Clarifying Questions
You ask questions for three main reasons:
- To get additional information that will help you identify and label the question
- To demonstrate to the interviewer that you are not shy about asking probing questions under difficult circumstances (something you’ll be doing on a regular basis as a consultant)
- To turn the question into a conversation. Nothing turns an interviewer off quicker than a five-minute monologue.

Organize Your Answer
Identify and label your case, then lay out your structure. This is the hardest part of a case – and the most crucial. It drives your case and is often the major reason behind whether you get called back.

Hold that Thought for "One Alligator"
The interviewer wants you to think out loud, but think before speak. If you make a statement that is way off-base in an interview, the interviewer will wonder if he can trust you in front of a client.

Manage Your Time
Your answer should be as linear as possible. Don’t get bogged down in the details. Answer from a macro-level and move the answer forward. Stay focused on the original question.

By the Numbers
If possible, try to work numbers into your answer. Demonstrate that you think quantitatively and that you are comfortable with numbers.

Be Coachable
Listen to the interviewer’s feedback. Is she trying to guide you back on track? Pay attention to her body language. Are you boring her or is she enthralled?

Be Creative and Brainstorm
Consulting firms like liberal arts candidates with intellectual curiosity who can "think outside the box" and offer up a new and interesting perspective.

Exude Enthusiasm and a Positive Attitude
Recruiters want people who are excited by problem solving and can carry that enthusiasm throughout the entire interview.

Bring Closure and Summarize
Create a sense of closure by summarizing the case. Review your findings, restate your suggestions, and make recommendations.
Case Interview Tips

Case interviews – they’re about stacking up your skills against a real business challenge. You’ll be asked to demonstrate your problem-solving skills, your analytical ability, and your strategic and logical thinking. These case interviews also help us assess your common sense, creativity, and comfort with ambiguity. At the same time, you’ll gain insight into our approach because these cases represent real client projects.

Cases help assess a candidate across multiple dimensions, and your answers should project clear thinking, practical judgment, and a professional demeanor. Apply this five-step approach while working through the case interview:

1. Understand the issue; ask clarifying questions as needed.
2. Identify the underlying assumptions.
3. Summarize key issues and findings.
4. State your recommendations.
5. Outline next steps and expected results/impacts.

The interviewee is not expected to provide the ultimately right answer, but rather to clearly convey his/her logic and thought process. Sample case interviews illustrate such thought processes and imitate an actual case dialogue.

Case Interview Tips

To help you demonstrate your best thinking in the case interview, you are encouraged to:

- Take notes throughout the case exercise.
- Be sure you understand the case question.
- Ask questions, but don’t use them as a crutch – we’re interested in how you connect the dots, not in painting the picture for you.
- Develop and articulate a framework and the initial hypothesis that you intend to explore.
- Take time to compose your thoughts – don’t just start talking.
- Structure your analysis into a clear logical story.
- Walk the interviewer through your thinking and explain your assumptions.
- Don’t panic. Engage the interviewer in a business conversation.
- Don’t forget that the case interview is an opportunity to see some of the projects we work on.

Mastering the Case Interview

The case interview is employed primarily by management-consulting firms, as well as investment-banking companies, and is increasingly being used by other types of corporations as at least part of the job-interviewing process. Some firms use case interviews only for MBA job candidates, while others use them for undergraduates, as well.

Case interviews are designed to scrutinize the skills that are especially important in management consulting and related fields: quantitative skills, analytical skills, problem-solving ability, communications skills, creativity, flexibility, the ability to think quickly under pressure, listening skills, business acumen, keen insight, interpersonal skills, the ability to synthesize findings, professional demeanor, and powers of persuasion.

Above all, the firm will be looking for someone who can do the real work at hand. Management-consulting companies, for example, want to know that you are the kind of person who can make a good impression on clients. Describing a presentation on case interviewing given at Columbia University by representatives of McKinsey and Company, Jim Oh notes that consulting firms value case interviews because "there is no right background for consulting. Consulting requires working in unfamiliar territories, thinking on your feet, and performing in situations where you never have enough time."

Experts agree on many of the fine points for approaching case interviews:

**Practice extensively before undergoing a case interview.** Use the resources and web sites mentioned in this handout to practice. Vault.com, which has some of the best resources on the Internet regarding case interviewing, suggests starting out by practicing explaining something like how to change a tire. Move on to assessing a situation for friends or family members, such as which bank they should choose for a checking account. In all cases, try to avoid "um's" and other filler words. Practice summarizing in a minute or less, advises Vault.com. We have arranged for you to have free, unrestricted privileges. Register to access the Vault guides to case interviews. Click on the Vault icon on our website to get started.
Listen carefully to the question. Paraphrase it back to the interviewer to ensure your understanding. As StudentAdvantage.com puts it in its article on case interviewing, "Listening" is the most important skill a consultant has. The case isn’t about you or the consultant; it’s about the client. You may also want to take notes; in most cases the interviewer will allow you to do so. Vault.com suggests bringing not only a pad of paper but a pad of graph paper in case you want to create a graph as part of your conclusion.

Silence -- but not too much of it -- is golden. The interviewer expects you to take a minute or so to collect your thoughts, so don't be afraid of silence. It's a nice idea, however, to ask the interviewer if it's OK to take a moment to ponder the case. And don't take too much time. Experts agree that five minutes would be excessive.

Remember that rarely is there one "right" answer for analyzing a case. Your process for reaching your conclusions is equally important to the interviewer as is the conclusion itself. In fact, the interviewer wants to observe as much of that process as possible, so it's important -- once you've taken the time to gather your thoughts -- to "think out loud" as you're working through the case.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. The case interview is meant to be interactive, with lots of back and forth between you and the interviewer. Questions are expected, especially because the information provided about the case will likely be incomplete. The interviewer will be looking at your resourcefulness in collecting information. Make sure you ask your questions in a logical -- not random -- progression. Vault.com notes that it's helpful to adopt "the persona of an actual consultant trying to learn about the assignment" and warns that failing to ask questions is a fatal error in the case interview. Be sure, also, to listen carefully to the answers to your questions. And don't get rattled if the interviewer wants to know why you want the information you're asking for. It's all part of understanding your thought process.

Prioritize the issues and objectives. Don't get bogged down trying to deal with every aspect of the case. As you ask questions, you should be able to pick up clues as to which issues are most important. Some of those clues might be meant to lead you back on track if you've gone astray, so be sure to listen carefully. If direction is not forthcoming, don't be afraid to take control of the conversation, advises Vault.com, to get to the meat of the case.

Don't be afraid to think outside the box. Creativity and brainstorming may be just what the interviewer is looking for. Some of the standard advice about case interviews is the same advice that applies to any kind of interview:

Maintain eye contact. Eye contact will help you engage the interviewer, establish rapport, and contribute to the interactivity of the interview.

Project confidence. Your ability to work the case confidently, without getting flustered or frustrated, is key.

Demonstrate your enthusiasm. Behaving as though you feel it's fun to tackle this kind of problem is integral to showing how well you'd fit in as a consultant or whatever position you're interviewing for. Assure your interviewer though your enthusiastic demeanor that you are exactly the kind of person he or she would enjoy working with.

Resources:
Quintessential Careers, Mastering the Case Interview, by Katharine Hansen, Ph.D. 2011
CaseQuestions.com, 2011
Deloitte Tips on Case Interviewing, 2011