

# Acing the Case Interview

Case interviews are commonly used by consulting firms to assess a candidate's analytical and problem-solving ability. Instead of focusing on your personal qualities, the interviewer will ask case questions that often incorporate business concepts. While case interviews may be intimidating at first, with practice they can be your key to landing a job. Even firms in other industries besides consulting may use case questions as well, particularly in finance and marketing/sales interviews. This guide will introduce the three main types of case questions, provide examples of each, and introduce an easy guide to answering any case question.

## What are the Three Main Types of Case Questions?

### Brainteasers

- Brainteasers range from riddles to probability questions.
- They are generally less emphasized during a case interview because it is difficult to prepare for these types of questions.
- Examples:
  1. *If you roll two dice, what is the probability the sum of the numbers you get is odd?*
  2. *Imagine you are in a room with 3 switches. In an adjacent room there are 3 bulbs (all are off at the moment), and each switch belongs to one bulb. It is impossible to see from one room to another. How can you find out which switch belongs to which bulb, if you may enter the room with the bulbs only once?*

### Market-Sizing Questions

- These questions ask you to estimate the size of a specific market, usually in the U.S.
- There are 4 types of questions, population-based, household-based, individual-based, and the occasional “who thinks up this stuff” question. In order to figure out what type of question you are being asked, you must decide if the item is used by a population, by households, or by individuals.
  1. *Population-based: How many gas stations are there in the U.S.?*
  2. *Household-based: How many garden hoses were sold in the U.S. last year?*
  3. *Individual-based: How many pairs of boxers are sold in the U.S. each year?*
  4. *“Who thinks up this stuff?:” How much does a 747 weigh?*
- It is important to know some basic assumptions in order to answer these questions, such as:
  1. US population: 250-300 million
  2. US households: 100 million
  3. Americans per household: 2.8

- Use numbers that make your mathematical computations as simple as possible: remember, you are not being tested on your basic math skills, but on your ability to logically reason through and articulate your answer.
- Justify your final answer and point out any considerations you did not take into account that could affect your answer. This shows your interviewer your ability to analyze the possible shortcomings in your answer, as well as your sensitivity to alternate solutions.
- Think out loud and jot down notes to keep your interviewer engaged and organize your thoughts.
- To find up-to-date statistics go to [www.bls.gov](http://www.bls.gov) and [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

### Business Case Questions

- Business case questions provide you with a mini case study, simulating a project a consultant might experience in the workplace.
- These questions can be open-ended and take about 10-15 minutes to answer, or they can be very detailed and include many steps, taking 30 minutes or more to answer.
- Often times, a market-sizing question will be included within the business case question.
- There are 12 common types of business case questions:
  1. Entering a new market
  2. Industry analysis
  3. Developing a new product
  4. Increasing profit
  5. Increasing sales
  6. Competitive response
  7. Mergers and acquisitions
  8. Price strategies
  9. Growth strategies
  10. Starting a new business
  11. Reducing costs
  12. Turnarounds
- Examples:
  1. *Your client manufactures hair products. It's thinking about entering the sunscreen market. First estimate the size of the sunscreen market and tell me if you think this is a good idea.*
  2. *Your client is a U.S. defense contractor that manufactures the fighter jets for the British Royal Air Force. The company has produced the \$20 million fighter jet for the past 12 years. The British government has decided to put the contract out to bid, however, and to win the program, the client's purchasing agents have estimated that the company will need to cut its costs by 5 percent. It has asked you to help it reduce costs.*

## A Guide to Answering Any Case Question

*Even if you are completely stumped by a question, this guide will give you a great starting point with which to frame your answer.*

### 1. Summarize the question

- This is a simple first step, but one that shows the interviewer you listened to the question.
- It allows you to hear the information again, and prevents you from answering the wrong question.

### 2. Verify the objectives

- Even if they seem obvious, there may be underlying objectives.
- Ask, “Are there any other objectives besides \_\_\_\_ I should know about?”

### 3. Ask clarifying questions

- This shows the interviewer you feel comfortable asking questions, while turning the case into a conversation.
- Depending on the case, you might ask questions about:
  - The company (public/private?)
  - The industry/life cycle
  - Competition (major players/market share)
  - Entry/exit barriers
  - Financial statements
  - Management team

### 4. Lay out your structure

- Take a moment to think about the structure and organization of your answer.
- Write it down! Consultants love visuals – whether it be decision trees, charts, or simple lists.
- Be familiar with common frameworks (e.g., Porters 5 forces, The 3 C’s, The 4 P’s, etc.)

## Some General Tips – What are Employers Looking For?

- **Organize** your answer. Many people underestimate the importance of providing an organized, logical answer. If you are jumping from one idea to the next, your interviewer will not be able to follow your thought process or understand your final answer. This is where writing things down can help you. Recapping your answer and providing a summarizing conclusion will also help organize your response and end on a decisive note.
- **Articulate** your answer. You may have brilliant ideas, but you need to be able to communicate them to your interviewer as well. Here is where your communication skills become extremely important. Your interviewer wants to see if you can speak in front of a client. Are you well-spoken, or are you clearly nervous and stuttering over your words? Having knowledge of basic business jargon can also be useful in articulating your thoughts. It is important to remain calm, and feel confident in your response.

- **Be creative.** Coming up with a creative answer to a case question will make you stick out in the interviewer’s mind. Consulting requires creative problem-solving ability, so having a unique answer to a question your interviewer has probably been asking candidates all day can give you an edge. Don’t be afraid to offer alternative answers as well. It will make you stand out as someone who thinks out of the box and can offer several possible solutions.
- **Take your time.** If you blurt out a thought before thinking about it, your interviewer will feel that you can not be trusted when it comes time to put you in front of a client. Remember, pauses are natural in conversation, so THINK before you speak.
- **Engage your interviewer.** Turn the case into a conversation by involving your interviewer, whether it be by asking relevant questions or sharing your notes. If your interviewer seems bored or uninterested, you may ask a question like “Does this assumption seem reasonable to you?” This allows you to get feedback while engaging your interviewer, making the case interactive and, believe it or not, fun!

## Practice, Practice, Practice!

- Case questions involve a new way of thinking and can be overwhelming if you do not do as many practice questions as possible.
- Much of the information provided here is detailed in the book *Case In Point*, by Marc P. Cosentino, the former director of Career Services at Harvard University. This resource can be found in the CALS Career Library in 177 Roberts Hall.
- Check out the websites of various consulting firms – many of them include practice case questions.
- Have fun! If you feel comfortable tackling case questions, you may actually enjoy answering them!

## More Practice Questions

1. How much does a NYC taxi driver make in a year? (*Hint: profit=revenues-expenses*)
2. How many children are born in the US each year?
3. You are the product manager for a noodle product company. You have two major product lines: cup products and block products. Your product lines are losing money. What should you do?
4. How many DVD’s are lost in the mail each year through Netflix?