



## Case Interviews

Case interviews are used most often by consulting firms who provide strategic management consulting services to their clients. A case interview tests your ability to:

- Communicate at a strategic level under pressure
- Adapt to new, unexpected information and situations
- Think abstractly under ambiguous circumstances
- Reach logical conclusions from a limited amount of data

According to Wet Feet Press, the types of case questions you may encounter include market-sizing questions, brain-teasers, business strategy questions and business operations questions.

### Market Sizing Questions

Examples of basic market sizing questions include “how many dogs are there in the United States?” or “how much paint does it take to paint the ships in the U.S. Navy?”. More sophisticated versions of these questions might include a business variation. For example: “What is the market size for surfboards in the United States?”.

The interviewer is evaluating your thought process, your problem-solving ability and your ability to think quickly under pressure. It is more important to demonstrate sound reasoning than to arrive at a specific, correct answer.

Some tips for answering market sizing questions are:

- Use round numbers to keep things simple
- State the questions you would need to answer to make an accurate estimate, and consider using hypothetical yet realistic numbers that you would use to reach your conclusion
- Use a pen and paper or calculator if needed to keep track of your arithmetic
- Arrive at a logical conclusion if possible; at the very least, describe your process for arriving at a logical conclusion

### Brain-Teasers

Examples of brain-teasers are questions like “Name ten things you can do with a paper clip besides hold paper together”, or “If you have eight balls that appear identical and one

is heavier than the others, how many trials on a balance-type scale would it take to determine which ball is heaviest?”.

Some brain-teasers, like the “paper clip question”, test your creativity and your ability to think outside of conventional norms. The “heaviest balls” question is more quantitatively oriented and requires logical, linear thinking. Testing your abstract problem-solving ability is at the heart of brain-teasing questions.

Some tips for answering brain-teasers are:

- Think aloud so the interviewer understands your process
- Don’t give up or give a flippant answer; take the question seriously and give it your best shot
- Don’t look shocked or dismayed by the question (these reactions, though natural, can be perceived as a lack of confidence in your problem-solving ability)
- If you can’t derive a specific answer, discuss the process you’d use to solve the problem

### **Business Strategy Questions**

Strategy is at the heart of many consulting jobs, so rigorous questions may be asked to test the extent to which you think and speak at a strategic level. Business strategy questions require many of the same skills used to analyze case studies encountered in academic course work, but in an interview there is little time to reflect on the wisdom of one course of action versus another.

Business strategy questions tend to be scenario-based. For example:

- “You own a line of food products that is distributed regionally through gourmet food shops. What would you need to consider if you wanted to expand your distribution on a national level?”
- “A major manufacturing firm is considering entering a specialty market with retail distribution. What factors should they consider?”
- “A large medical insurance organization is planning to expand their product line into long-term care insurance. How would you help them assess the best line extension strategy?”

These questions are designed to determine your ability to handle complex business issues and to communicate about them. You will typically have about 15 minutes to present your ideas, including questions about your idea from the interviewer. A successful answer isn’t necessarily whether it’s the right strategy; it’s how you describe it and support your case. Some ideas for business strategy questions:

- Stick to the major issues: competition, market positioning, consumer trends, profitability, branding, domestic or international economic considerations.

- Have one or more frameworks to work from to organize your presentation of the issues. A common framework that is somewhat simplistic are the 3 C's: company, consumer, competition. Another framework might view the case from the perspectives of multiple functions, such as marketing, finance, product development, operations and organizational development.
- Ask questions of the interviewer if you need clarification. Asking a well-timed, intelligent question can also give you time to think.
- Avoid using too much jargon in your answer; use easy to understand terminology.

### **Business Operations Questions**

There may be some overlap between business operations questions and business strategy questions, but business operations questions will focus more on how work gets done or on how to produce measurable results than on entering new markets, expanding product lines or acquiring other firms. Purchasing, supply chain, manufacturing, scheduling, physical plant issues, financial management, sales and engineering are all fair game for business operations questions. They are designed to test your understanding of how work gets done and results measured within organizations.

Paradoxical situations (e.g., declining revenue and increased market share) may be part of the question. Questions asking you to identify the reason for decreases in profits or problems with core business processes are also common. You may be asked to describe how you would help a client decide on how to automate processes or convert to a more integrative technologies. The nature of the questions may mirror the areas where the firm with which you are interviewing specializes.

Some ideas for answering business operations questions:

- Zero in on the main issue. This may require some back and forth with the interviewer to clarify the hypothetical situation, but eventually it is wise to reach a conclusion about the likely cause of, for example, declining profits or supply chain problems.
- Use your working knowledge of finance, distribution and production issues to create a cohesive framework within which to explore the issue.
- Recommend action; give advice.

### **Recommended Reading**

*Free, comprehensive guides to case interviewing, including Ace Your Case, are available to CGU students and alumni at [www.wetfeet.com/cb/schools/claremont/toc.asp](http://www.wetfeet.com/cb/schools/claremont/toc.asp). Please contact the Office of Career Management at 909-621-8177 for our login information.*