# Case Interview Advice From Bain

## Idea In Short

Treat the case interviewer as a client you are collaborating with, not a deposition. Structure broadly, summarize as you go, pick up on cues and leave time to land a recommendation with implementation in mind.

## It Is Consulting Interview Season

Well-groomed MBAs sit across small tables from consulting partners and senior managers in something called a case interview. Readers from consulting firms know this fire drill and probably remember it fondly, like Marines who recall hell week. For those in the throes of full-time consulting interviews, resources abound. Bain's own examples offer a quick read, and a 40-minute video comparing three candidates on the same questions reveals the pros and cons of each answer. 1

## What Is a Case Interview

For those not in consulting, a primer helps. Case interviews differ from behavioral interviews, which ask you to describe yourself, your strengths and your five-year plan. Case interviews are not focused on who you are but on how you think. The interviewer wants to see how you think through the problem. The interviewer provides a situation and an ambiguous question. The candidate then has 20 to 25 minutes to engage the interviewer in a thoughtful and logical conversation that uncovers data and insights pointing to a solution or series of options.

## Upfront Planning

Know what you are getting into. If you are not familiar with basic business concepts, financial statements, analytic frameworks and the general interview method, it will not be pretty. A case interview typically runs 30 to 45 minutes, and the time goes fast. Interviewing at five or six big consulting firms, a candidate might have one great interview and two good ones for every complete bust. It is meant to be difficult, and difficult things have value, so press on. 2

## Treat the Interviewer Like a Client

How would you treat a client you met and were interviewing for the first time? That is how you should treat the interviewer. Demonstrate competence and build rapport. Ask open-ended questions initially, then guide the conversation. Dig into the clues the interviewer gives you. Explain why you are moving the conversation along. Do not slam them with random questions fired one after another. This is not a deposition. You are collaborating to crack the case together. You might say it sounds like the company has done well with innovative products so far, but is it possible consumers are no longer as interested in features and have shifted toward functionality and price?

## Summarize as You Go

The conversation will likely wander from one thread to another. Mentally use buckets, moving from revenue to costs, from marketing to operations, from change management to competition. Without structure and summarizing like mental meeting minutes, the interview will resemble a stream-of-consciousness novel. Do not be afraid to share your hypotheses. You might summarize that there have been no new local competitors and technology has not been a source of differentiation. Summarizing shows you can synthesize, which is a core consulting skill. 3

## Think Broadly First

Candidates usually get one or two minutes at the start to organize their thoughts and plan their line of questioning. Use these 120 seconds to brainstorm the different areas to pursue. Even if the problem is about a manufacturer, it could easily be a mergers and acquisitions (M&A), marketing or finance issue. You are a consultant, so think like one. You might note that you have experience with the semiconductor industry and know it is driven by economies of scale through Moore's law, but you would like to ask broader questions about the market environment and product mix first.

## Pick Up on Cues

Show emotional intelligence. If you are getting curt answers and closed-off body language, take a hint. You are barking up the wrong tree. When the interviewer gives out facts or seems positive on a question, drill down with more detailed questions or analyses that support your potential solution. You might note that if margins improved despite a volume decrease, that could mean the product mix changed or something happened on the cost side.

## Watch Your Time

Do not get yanked at the end like a gong show because you ran out of time. Pace yourself. Make sure you cover the main two or three areas you want to cover. Leave enough time to start putting together the recommendations and next steps. Time management in a case mirrors time management on a real engagement, where you must deliver within budget.

## Think About Implementation

One criticism of management consultants is that they offer only pie-in-the-sky academic solutions. It shows maturity to consider implementation. Assessments were designed for consultants to then implement the work, and no consultant wants to end at phase one of a project. You might offer that implementing technology only works if it is reinforced with training, incentives and internal marketing, so some next steps might include those elements. Landing on implementation turns a clever analysis into a credible plan.

## Practice With Real Feedback

The candidates who improve fastest treat practice as a deliberate loop. They rehearse aloud with peers who give honest feedback rather than friends who simply cheer. They record themselves to catch filler words, rushed math and weak transitions. They review the pros and cons of different answers, just as Bain's comparison video does, to see what separates a strong response from a generic one. Volume without reflection cements bad habits, so each practice case should end with one specific improvement to target next time. Candidates who build this loop arrive at the interview having already internalized the rhythm of structured, collaborative problem solving. The interview then feels familiar rather than alien, which lets personality and judgment surface under pressure.

## Close With a Clear Recommendation

The strongest case interviews end with a crisp recommendation, not a data dump. State the answer, summarize the two or three reasons that support it and name the next steps. Acknowledge the key risk and how you would mitigate it, which shows judgment rather than blind optimism. Tie the recommendation back to the client's stated objective so the interviewer sees you solved the right problem. A clear close leaves the interviewer confident you could deliver the same clarity to a paying client on Monday morning.

- 1Bain's case interview preparation page offers practice cases and tips on clarifying the objective, structuring thinking and thinking aloud
- 2Bain's interviewing page explains that case interviews reward logical, structured thinking and creativity, with no single right answer
- 3Bain recruiters advise candidates to pause, structure their thinking and tailor the approach to the situation rather than force-fitting a memorized framework

## Summary

Case interviews mirror consulting work: structure problems, ask good questions, build rapport and communicate clearly. Treat the interviewer like a client, summarize as you go, think broadly first and always consider implementation. Difficult things have value, so press on.