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When in Doubt, M.B.A.s Turn to 'Bible'

Business Students, Aspiring Consultants Rely on Examples in 'Case in Point' Study Guide to Prepare for Job Interviews

By LESLIE KWOH



Daniella Zalcman for The Wall Street Journal

Columbia Business School student Johannes Preis, left, and fellow student Travis Reaves during a mock interview session last month.

On some college campuses, it's hailed as a Bible—the guide every M.B.A. or any aspiring consultant needs to ace some of the toughest job interviews. It even comes with a set of commandments; the first: "Listen to the Question."

Now in its seventh edition, "Case in Point" has become the biggest business book you've never heard of, a best seller with more than 100,000 copies sold in print and electronic versions, according to its author, Marc Cosentino. Published in 1999, the 228-page paperback explains and unpacks the open-ended business dilemmas—known as case questions—that characterize interviews at management-consulting firms like

McKinsey & Co.

"It's the first book people go to," says Ben Nowell, the 40-year-old president of the Columbia Graduate Consulting Club, a group of several dozen students who meet to stage mock interviews using questions pulled from "Case in Point" and other sources.

The guide's popularity offers a glimpse into the world of aspiring management consultants, who often spend months preparing for interviews at one of the so-called Big Three firms: McKinsey, Bain & Co. and Boston Consulting Group Inc.

From now until the end of the year, students will cram for on-campus interviews, which generally take place from October through December. The prize: a job with a six-figure starting salary and an entrée into an elite group that includes prominent CEOs and entrepreneurs.

Mr. Cosentino, 57 years old, says he never imagined his book—now available in four languages—would become a cult classic. The latest edition, which sells for \$30, currently tops [Amazon.com](#)'s best-seller chart in the consulting category, and is the site's 879th most popular book overall as of Wednesday.

According to Nielsen BookScan, 17,000 copies of the latest edition and about 58,000 copies of all other editions have been sold to date, though this figure doesn't include e-books sold on the Kindle or bulk purchases from colleges, such as the 200 copies Harvard Business School orders annually.

The studying is all to prepare for an intense process that will ultimately "separate the wheat from the chaff," Mr. Cosentino says. "You're asking people to put in 70 hours of prep work for an interview they might not get."

Between 20% and 30% of the graduating classes from top business schools like Harvard, Columbia and Stanford University take jobs in consulting after graduation, according to recent statistics from those schools.

Mr. Cosentino, who didn't have a background in management consulting when he wrote the guide, says the book's aim isn't only to help students ace the case interview process, but also to train them to "think like a senior manager."

In consulting interviews, which typically last 30 to 45 minutes, a partner or senior consultant from the firm spends the first half probing the interviewee's leadership experience. He or she then presents a scenario, often inspired by a real-life company predicament, such as whether to break into a new market.

Armed with nothing more than a pencil and pad, the interviewee must devise a solution on the spot—all while doing the math aloud so the interviewer can evaluate how he or she thinks.

Interviewers often intentionally throw candidates off by telling them their answers are wrong, just to see how they will react, Mr. Cosentino says, so he simulates that approach with the students he tutors. As the student begins outlining a solution, he repeatedly interrupts and tells them they're wrong, pushing to see whether the student can defend the argument without getting defensive.

Brian Rolfs, director of global recruiting at McKinsey, says the firm doesn't use such tactics. "We don't throw curveballs," he says. "[The interview] is meant to be a dialogue."

Bain global chief talent officer Russ Hagey said "there may be others" who try to throw candidates off, but his firm does not subscribe to this approach. "We really want to put people in a position to show their best."

"If you're not prepared, you could be right for consulting, but you'll probably fail," says Christopher Malone, a 30-year-old BCG consultant who graduated earlier this year from Dartmouth College's Tuck School of Business, where he led the consulting club.

Mr. Malone, who interviewed at four firms in January 2011 and eventually received two internship offers, including one from BCG that led to a full-time job, says he used "Case in Point" but quickly moved on to other prep materials. While he found the book too "rigid" and formulaic in its approach, he says it was nevertheless a good primer in introducing him to some of the basic principles of case studies.

Many take the "Case Commandments" as gospel. They were evident during a recent practice session at Columbia Business School, when Travis Reaves, 28, instructed Johannes Preis, 27, to determine whether a carbonated beverage brand should launch flavored bottled water. Mr. Reaves, a former McKinsey summer intern, has already secured a full-time job at the firm after he graduates next year, while Mr. Preis is currently in the midst of interviews at several firms.

After asking several clarifying questions (Commandment No. 5) about the product name and market size, Mr. Preis spent two minutes scribbling furiously on a piece of paper and organizing his areas of focus (Commandment No. 6) into plant utilization, regional markets and management expertise. By the time he summarized his rationale to Mr. Reaves (Commandment No. 13), he had filled four sheets of paper. His conclusion, after crunching sales figures, calculating the profit margin and converting ounces to gallons: For a 12.5% slice of the market, the product was "feasible."

Mr. Cosentino began writing study guides for consulting interviews while working at Harvard's undergraduate career office in the 1990s. The school published his initial guides, but he later moved to self-publish "Case in Point." He now runs a business consulting would-be consultants.

Consulting firms seem to view Mr. Cosentino with ambivalence. He recalls how a BCG partner once chided him for revealing a current case-study question to a group of students. But BCG also in 2007 ordered 1,000 copies of the book to give to prospective applicants, he says. A BCG spokesman couldn't confirm whether either incident took place.

But the popularity of "Case in Point," along with other study guides such as Victor Cheng's "Case Interview Secrets," may work against aspiring students.

Mel Wolfgang, BCG's head of recruiting in the Americas, interviews about 100 students every year and says he can tell when someone sounds too "scripted."

"It's sort of painful," he says, about hearing such responses. "Preparation is crucial. Overpreparation can be fatal."

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