According to Gartner, phone interactions will drop from 41% to 12% over the next five years, as consumers keep going digital. Businesses that excel in digital customer service will clearly have a leg up over the competition in this new world. Here are seven proven ways to get there quickly and easily.

1. **Answer is a big part of the answer**
   One of the biggest reasons customers pick up the phone for service is that they cannot find answers or resolve problems on company web sites. In fact, in a survey of nearly 18,000 consumers, CEB (now Gartner) found that 58 percent of callers had unsuccessfully tried self-service on company web sites when they reached out to the contact center. A survey of 5,000 consumers by Forrester Consulting also found that the inability of companies to answer customer questions on their web sites is one of the top pain points in customer service. No wonder consumers pick up the phone in frustration, which is not good news for agents!

   Make sure you deploy a robust knowledge management system that not only helps customers find answers with search methods that go beyond keyword search to include natural language search, faceted navigation, guided search, etc., but also solves problems through guided self-service that simulates an interaction with a human expert. Virtual assistants handle simpler questions well and advanced AI technologies such as case-based reasoning (CBR) excel at handling more complex questions through customer self-service or agent augmentation. Improved delivery of contextual knowledge to an employee or customer reduces time to answer by 20% to 80%, according to Gartner! We agree—our clients have reported up to a 100% increase in speed to agent competency and 50% reduction in training time, while enabling any agent to take any call. On the self-service side, we have seen up to 70% call deflection!

2. **Think digital-first processes**
   When you design customer service processes, think digital. Don’t be constrained by the limitations of legacy systems or point products for digital engagement that break down when the interaction calls for rich capabilities or the process involves more than one digital touchpoint in the same interaction.

   A best-in-class digital customer service solution would provide deep capabilities to engage customers through chatbots, AI-guided digital self-service, video chat, messaging, cobrowse-aided phone engagement, cobrowse-aided web site navigation and form-filling, proactive digital offers, proactive digital notifications, etc. They also deliver a connected experience across those touchpoints through a customer engagement hub. For instance, channel-integrated, knowledge and AI-enabled chatbots can answer queries, take customers on a web
site tour, push relevant web pages, and escalate with context to a live agent, when needed. Secure, cobrowse-aided form-filling with concurrent chat or phone conversation (such interactions are often called “multimodal”) can help avoid an expensive customer interaction in a branch office. In fact, cobrowsing leads all touchpoints in CSAT at 78%, according to Forrester! Likewise, video chat might help avert a field visit by an insurance claims expert or a shopper’s trip to a retail store, which create high effort for the customer and cost for the business. Keep this in mind when you look for next-gen digital capabilities to serve the next-gen digital customer.

3. Digital-first also applies to agents (and their desktop!)
Note that customer service agents need to be digitally savvy in order to serve the digital consumer. This is starting to happen naturally as more millennials and Gen Z take over the contact center workforce. However, the tools that many contact centers use tend to be voice-focused and antiquated, hampering digital customer service. Contrary to conventional wisdom, a workman’s quarrel with his/her tools is often justified! As you digitalize your workforce, make sure you digitalize the agent workspace with a digital-first omnichannel desktop. Also note that millennials and Gen Z don’t like to keep information in their heads. Many of them have probably never looked at a map in the age of GPS-assisted driving—they like guidance whether it is for driving or financial planning! So, it is critical that the agent desktop offers easy, push-button access to contextual knowledge and AI, in addition to rich digital capabilities.

4. Analyze for derailment
Analytics are critical to identifying points of switching from digital to traditional channels along the customer journey. For example, knowledge analytics and customer journey analytics can help assess digital self-service success. Likewise, if a chat session results in a customer request to call back or a customer-initiated phone call, analytics will help to identify what is causing it. For example, is it the chat wait time, complexity of the inquiry topic, or skill level of the agent that led to the channel switch?

5. Deflect but delight
Offer customers a chance to resolve issues with digital self-service when they are about to escalate to an agent. However, it is important to retain context across self-service and agents if and when the interaction does get escalated. This keeps the service interaction moving forward instead of forcing the customer to start all over again.

With the advent of the smartphone, customers on hold in IVR systems can be sent an SMS link to answers, based on caller information and IVR context, providing them an option to check out contextual answers or guidance without losing their place in the queue. This is something that eGain’s knowledge and AI solution does through seamless integration with leading IVR systems.

6. Teach them how to fish
Digital collaboration technologies, such as cobrowsing, with simultaneous phone conversation, can be used by agents to coach customers on how to get things done digitally, whether it is
finding information or completing a transaction, such as form-filling or a purchase. This is like providing training wheels on kids' bikes.

Savvy organizations also make sure to promote digital service options through traditional channels by simply getting the message out and offering incentives like faster response time on digital channels and priority placement in the assisted queue for customers who started with digital self-service first. They could also explore disincentives such as charging an additional fee for non-digital service.

7. Press the gas pedal
Digital transformation of customer service does not have to be a “big iron” project. Look for solution providers that put skin (and body!) in the game. Are they offering you risk-free, expert-guided production trials in the cloud free of charge? Do they have a proven method for continuous agile value delivery? In the new two-speed operation of business systems (and business!), as defined by McKinsey and Gartner, digital engagement systems can be your fast-mode systems for innovation and differentiation that leverage slower-changing systems of record, such as CRM, ECM, ERP, call center infrastructure, and transactional systems that keep the lights on.

Follow these seven steps, and you will be well on your way to delivering digital customer service with distinction in 2018 and beyond!