Product Review: Fuze Suite 8.0

Can FuzeDigital position itself as an early Social Business Platform vendor?

Entering the Era of Social Business

A social business is the convergence of Social CRM and Enterprise 2.0: it is when a business merges their internal activities to become customer centric with their external activities to interact better with those same customers. Both disciplines flourish on collaboration and engagement and they both aim to improve the customer-centric behavior for the enterprise where they are deployed. They also use similar tools and technologies to accomplish their objectives – so it is only natural to expect organizations that adopted both to want to leverage and integrate between them.

A Social Business model is a stepping stone towards becoming a collaborative enterprise (see Figure 1) where both customers and organizations work together building more value from their interactions – together.

It is the next natural evolution for businesses that adopt Social channels and technologies and realize the potential behind them. If there is value to be generated by targeting and embracing one of the two populations (customers and employees), there is a lot more potential value in bringing them together.
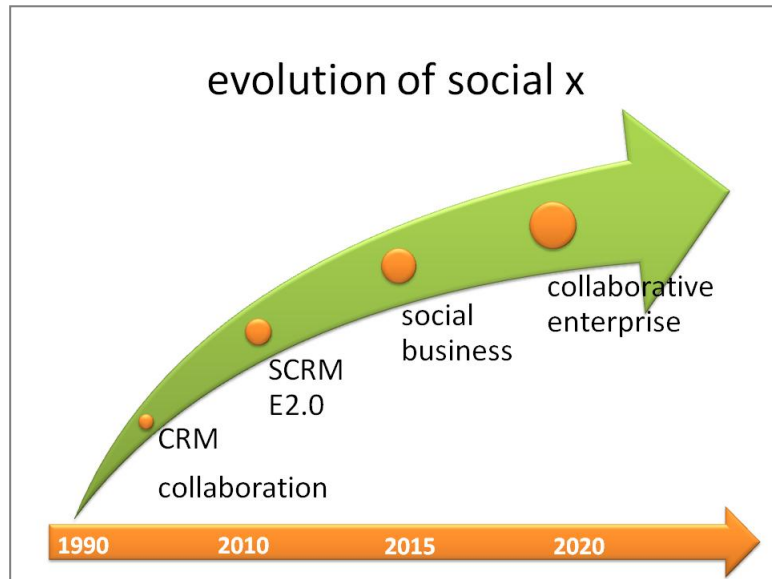
evolution of social x

CRM collaboration — SCRM E2.0 — social business — collaborative enterprise

1990   2010   2015   2020

Figure 1

That comingling of the two populations requires a platform, a place where users and customers collaborate and contribute value to the interaction. Those platforms are the ones that vendors are building and labeling social business platforms right now.

The Social Business Platform

There are four core components in a Social Business platform (see Figure 2):

Collaboration Engine – the software that enables users, partners, and employees to collaborate in a central location. What it does, and how, varies according to the function it supports – at the very least it will provide an electronic forum where to congregate, with varying functions that support the specific uses for the platform. Ideal will be a single product with flexible characteristics, but it could be more than one solution.

Reputation Engine – This is one of the critical components. As the old saying goes, in the internet no one knows you are a dog (it was actually a cartoon in The New Yorker) – but in a community, they should. A reputation engine will provide each member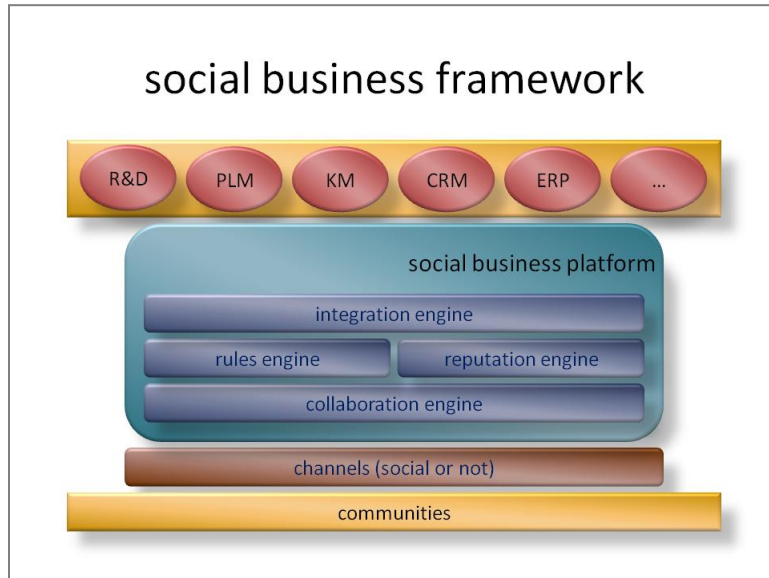 of the community with a ranking in the community, a reputation score, and activity-based accomplishments. Popular votes from the rest of the community will influence each score, promoting and demoting experts in each topic, category – even down to the content of a specific answer or question. A good reputation engine will also engage members of the community to return to the community and contribute to increase their reputation. Obviously the reputation from one topic or community does not automatically translate to others, which is why the reputation engine must be able to distinguish among the many areas where it keeps track of reputations.

Figure 2

Rules Engine – This is not a standard rules engine for business, although it can potentially be adapted, but one that determines three things: security settings, roles and responsibilities, and permissions and exclusions for each piece of content or knowledge produced in the collaboration engine. This Rules Engine is what differentiates a social business platform from a traditional community platform where all content is open and mostly has no rules for access or management. In a Social Business all information created and brought into the collaboration engine for the purpose of sharing can only be shared as determined by rules, as some of it may be sensitive for specific roles or responsibilities only. The Rules Engine is one of the elements that determine how a social business platform operates, and how it deals with the content created in it.

Integration Engine – The most value that a Social Business Platform brings to the organization is not merely the collaboration, but rather bringing the results of those collaborative efforts between customers and organizations into the company to implement them. Create better products, generate better knowledge, improve the experiences – these are the easiest to measure, but they all require some level of integration between the platform and the other systems in the organization. Making sure that this integration bears fruit is the job of the integration engine. This is another system that probably already exists in the organization and has to be repurposed for the specific needs of the Social Business Platform, or can be built ad-hoc depending on the chosen architecture to create the Social Business Platform. It is the link between the platform and the rest of the organization.

Of course, having a platform is not sufficient – an organization must use it to derive the value and benefits promised.

why you need a social business

outside of the business

customer has an idea…

customer creates knowledge…

customer knows fix for problem…

inside of the business

…but cannot implement the idea

…company creates same knowledge

…company has problem to be fixed

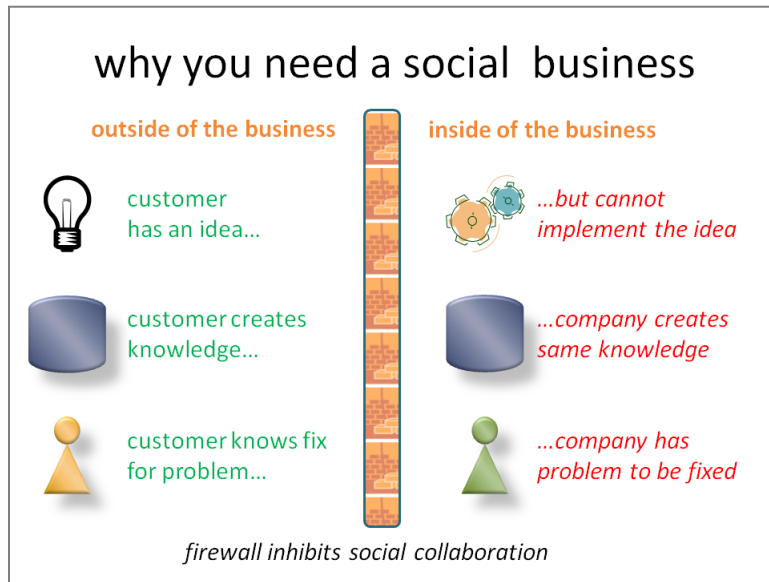*firewall inhibits social collaboration*

Figure 3

The collaboration between the organization and the customer yields very powerful results for any business (see Figure 3) – even more so for a customer-centric organization.

In addition to these, many more solutions and functions can and should be brought over to the Social Business platform, but that is dependent on each business and their needs. Once the platform is launched in the organization, many more needs can be identified and brought over. Alas, it has become almost a de-facto standard to start Social Business platforms on customer service functions, as the volume of interactions make it extremely easy to prove (or disprove) any potential benefit through better relationships. In most organizations, customer interactions happen in greater numbers in customer service functions.

The key to launching a social business platform is not the technology, as most organizations would think and undertake as their number one priority to become a social business, but rather to evolve business functions, processes, and technologies together to support the addition of the necessary functions. A large majority of successful organizations that began the migration to becoming a social business did so with the help of technology solutions that had already been deployed in the organization and evolved into social functions, not brand new solutions to deliver a new layer or complication to the organization.

It is imperative to successfully become a social business to focus on a technology vendor that can both support current, non-social-business processes and business functions, yet related to the customer interaction, while providing a path for those same functions to become more social, more engaging for the customer and the organization to collaborate.

Fuze Suite, from FuzeDigital, is one of the early products in this nascent market.

Fuze Suite as a Social Business Platform

FuzeDigital is a technology vendor established in the Redmond, Washington area. They have been in business since 2002 and have over 150 clients – counting heavyweights as Careerbuilder, Fujitsu, NPR (National Public Radio), and Turner Entertainment among them. They have spent the past few years helping their clients become social businesses.

Their product, called the Fuze Suite, was initially an eService suite of products that provided organizations with an easy to use and manage solution to master interactions across all channels and provide self-service and assisted-service to customers and staff (see figure 4 for more details). Early in the development of this product they understood that the key to success was not on providing more channels, rather to focus on how to make those channels work better.

Their solution focused on leveraging the community to create and manage a knowledge base, not on having more channels to support. While complete in their support of channels, it has been their focus on the mechanism to leverage the community and improve the quality of the knowledgebase that has been their key differentiator.

This key differentiation makes the path to becoming a social business different from other vendors: they did not need to add engagement and collaboration layers to their products (as most vendors have done in the past few years), but were able to focus on how to improve that engagement and collaboration that was part of their product already as they evolved with their customers.

Fuze Suite Modules

Base:
- Community Knowledge Base
- Reputation Engine
- Case Management
- Contact Management
- Feedback Management
- Secure Inbox
- Reporting and Dashboards

Optional:
- Fuze Social
  - Community Answers
  - Community Conversations
  - Community Ideas
- Chat
- Multi-Lingual Support
- Knowledge Packs
- Usage Analytics

Figure 4

FuzeDigital is a profitable entity with no debt. They have not taken in any venture capital investment and are owned primarily by its employees. While their approach to the enterprise market is unconventional (they don't spend many resources in marketing and sales) they boast a 97% customer satisfaction and renewal rate; most of their new customers are a result of word-of-mouth advertising and building on top of previous successes. As an example, they have 21 AAA clubs (all by recommendation of a previous one), and several credit unions in their client roster. Focusing on making their customers successful has proven their best marketing tool – also proving in the process that they not only provide a platform for a business to become social, but have also mastered how to run a business socially.

A Deeper Dive into Fuze Suite

Their product is a social business platform that grew by word-of-mouth and direct sales. Their main differentiators are:

- Flexible architecture
- Easy maintenance and administration
- Proven performance for their target market
- Precise focus on quality product
- Modular solution
- Emphasis on knowledge as a binding element
- Simple pricing plans
- Complete functionality to support broad collaboration models

FuzeDigital's realization that the knowledge base was at the core of their solution focused them heavily on how to make it more powerful and complete. This led to the development of a "social layer" working
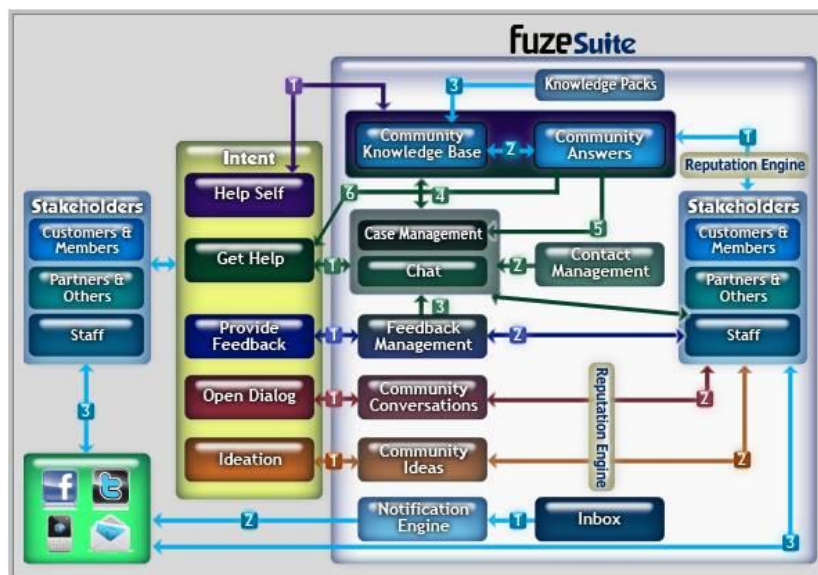

Figure 5

on top of the knowledgebase that includes a reputation engine and allows organizations to selectively decide what internal and/or external stakeholders are best suited to engage to create and evolve different sections of the knowledge base.

This segmentation of stakeholders, without regards whether they are customers or employees or partners or something else, creates an advanced model for community-generated and community-

managed knowledge. Not abandoning the knowledge to the traditional content- or knowledge-management tools and repositories, but rather continue to engage the original authors in the maintenance and care (rewarding them for it in addition to the original contribution) is a critical part of being a Collaborative Enterprise – and a Social Business.

In addition to providing a complete set of channels (email, chat, telephone, and self-service – see Figure 5 for a closer view) for customer service they help their customers leverage this platform into other areas. While Customer Interaction and Customer Service are usually the areas where a return on investment is easier to measure and realize, and usually the first focus area, Fuze Suite has unlocked value in many other areas for their customers:

- Oregon Health & Sciences University provides self-service and assisted-service support to physicians, nurses, and other OHSU staff on- and off-campus.
- Sandia Laboratory Federal Credit Union IT department uses Fuze Suite's knowledge base, case management and chat to support staff throughout its organization.
- Minnesota Power Employees Credit Union uses the contest component within the Fuze Suite's reputation engine to incent all staff to build and evolve their KB content - with special emphasis on their internal procedures - resulting in over 600 new KB articles and hundreds of enhancements made to their knowledge base within 90 days.

What Makes Fuze Suite Different

- o Reputation Engine
- o Flexible architecture
- o Easy administration and use
- o Focus on quality product
- o Modular solution
- o Knowledge as an independent element
- o Simple pricing plans
- o Complete functionality to support broad collaboration models

As FuzeDigital grew with their customers, they added a customer history component, a knowledge management component, and an API to allow for deeper integration into other systems.

While competitive in features with their main competitors (RightNow Technologies, Parature, eGain, KANA, and Genesys to name the most widely known for Customer Service, and Lithium, GetSatisfaction, and Jive on the community features), FuzeDigital is often a significantly cheaper alternative. Their differentiators make the price not an issue, rather a bonus element according to their customers. It is not being cheaper that opens the doors, rather their approach to community-generated / community-managed knowledge that does it with price a nice surprise for those that decide to engage with them.

Fuze Suite can be deployed in either SaaS (software as a service) or on-premise model, but most of their customers chose to use their multi-tenant, hosted solution. Although not important to many customers, the ability to run the Fuze Suite on-premise will appeal to those prospects and customers that are either responsible for compliance, or have internal restrictions on operations and data being placed outside of the organization.

The architecture and benchmarking done indicate it can support heavy loads and virtually any size of implementation – their focus is on Small and Midsize Businesses that preempts the need for massively large deployments, making it untested under real conditions in very large implementations. An interesting point to note in their architecture: they are built using a true SaaS architecture – which means they can leverage the cloud model to grow and scale to virtually any size. As opposed to other solutions that were built as on-demand or hosted applications and require extensive resources to operate, Fuze Digital can be deployed in a true cloud (Amazon's cloud is the only model that comes close to it, and Fuze Digital has proven to work in it without any problem) and leverage the power of the cloud to grow performance as demands increase.

Early on FuzeDigital focused on building a community-generated, community-managed solution to act as the base of a social business platform. As they worked with their customers in evolving this platform they began to realize that the minute details around control and access of the components of the knowledge base were essential. Fuze Suite features an easy-to-use administrative interface that brings a detailed layer of control for the knowledge base that is very granular and allows the community to fully collaborate on new content while keeping existing content active and integrating existing corporate data into the process as needed.

This control layer represents the rules layer we referenced in the social business model above and allows organizations to dictate who has access to what portions of the data and knowledgebase, and it allows the reputation generated for each user and piece of content to be managed very easily and applied only where necessary, or where allowed.

Fuze Suite Targets the Social Evolution

As FuzeDigital began to establish itself in the market, the market changed bringing along external social networks like Twitter and Facebook. Fuze, reacting to comments from their customers extended their community solution to these new social networks into their social platforms. It is key to know that they did not simply add an integration layer to support these networks, rather they made that integration layer a key part of their community-generated, community-managed knowledge base and brought the granular controls and reputation engine rankings to this integration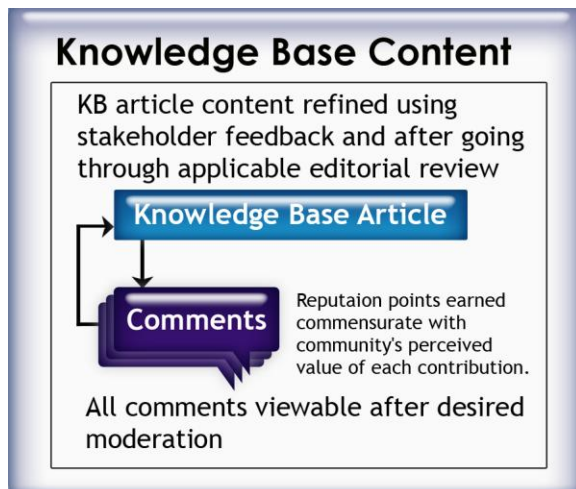, thus making the integration much more valuable than simply posting data in one or the other as most vendors have done.

Figure 6

During the development of this product, all done in-house, FuzeDigital realized they should aim for more than providing a community module. They were looking to leapfrog their competitors and to deliver something closer to what their customers wanted, and focused on delivering a more complete social business platform instead of another community.

Their focus shifted from building a community to creating a different model of community and they realized that the reputation engine they were building was probably the best way for them to accomplish this. Their efforts focused on how to create and make the reputation engine a differentiator.

Their efforts at building the reputation engine, as with everything else they do, was different than simply applying scores to the most frequent posters (although that is part of the solution). They focus on each element in the solution having its own reputation – including the individual's knowledge and the contents of the knowledgebase (see Figure 6) as well as the comments, additions, and all other elements associated with each component of their knowledge repository.

They also are unique in their approach of attributing reputation scores to specific subject matters and providing a relative ranking, as shown in Figure 7. This approach provides important granularity that is used throughout the Fuze Suite to identify specific expertise and request help via emails, text messages and direct messages to Twitter. This usage of a reputation engine to measure and motivate broad stakeholder involvement in creating and evolving knowledge base content, while still retaining

applicable editorial controls relevant to the particular KB content, is so different that FuzeDigital has filed for a patent on the way they leverage the reputation scores, how they are segmented, how they are assigned to each element, how they are used and how suggestions to improve KB content are processed. In other words, no one else manages the knowledge in the same way –
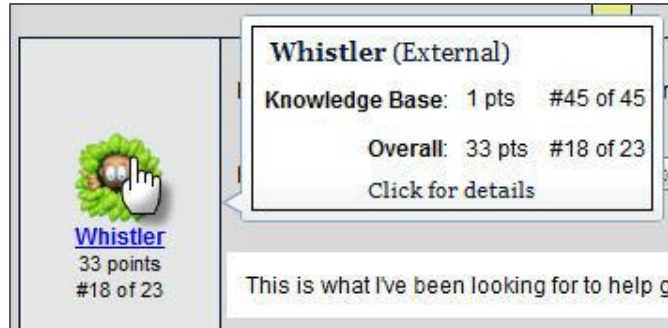

Figure 7

using segmentation as a critical component of identifying the appropriate stakeholder and processes to manage knowledge.

In addition to the reputation engine, they also created a set of rules that mashes up the reputation engine and the knowledge management focused mostly on customer service.

Some of these rules control who owns the response to a problem, a customer or the company, and how the content is updated as needed. They focus not only on community-generated content as their competitors, but also in community-maintained software. They also released rules related to closing support tickets in a community, updating customer history and knowledge management entries, and rules defining how reputation is added to content and measured.

Fuze Suite: Solid First Steps towards a Social Business Platform

Fuze Suite's reputation engine is impressive.

Being able to manage reputation for all members of the community across multiple categories is the aim of virtually all reputation engines, but this is the only one I see that can also assign reputation to the content itself, and track it down to each of the comments that may follow any content created.

Traditionally reputation has been assigned to people. Contributing to content generation and maintenance, participating in discussions around it, and proving expertise in a specific area is how reputation is assigned in most communities. The problem with this model is that the content itself is assumed to be good and solve the issue by extension of the creator.

Using reputation for the creator rather than the content implies that people cannot make mistakes or lack knowledge in a specific area where they may be knowledgeable but not experts. In certain instances the content generated by an expert is not the best content that exists for a specific solution, but the reputation engine would drive the value of that piece of content up, based on the reputation of the creator.

Assigning reputation to the content itself, in addition to the creator, and maintaining that reputation by usage statistics and feedback makes the knowledgebase infinitely more accurate. In addition, assigning reputation to a piece of knowledge allows it to rate the knowledge for different users and roles – a feature that Fuze Social makes very simple to use.

This level of granularity for content and people is a very flexible way to recognize the right people, and right content, across all forums and communities while keeping a centralized reputation score repository to understand the contributions and value that each member, and piece of content, brings to the community.

The rules engine is flexible and easy to manage like the rest of the application. The focus of the rules engine is to make sure that the right people and the right processes work together to create and maintain the right content. One of the tenets of becoming a social business is assigning roles and responsibilities for each person, and changing that easily for each process. Fuze Suite's granular control of the content and the people who are able to work with it accomplishes this and provides room to grow into other functions and processes easily.

The combination of the product yields a very interesting positioning for the company to enter the Social Business Platform. FuzeDigital has the starts of a good Social Business platform. Competitive in features where necessary, and easy to integrate, it is their reputation engine that merits a closer look and consideration.

I was impressed with the flexibility and ease of use of the interface, but very impressed by how the reputation engine works and operates together with the rules modules to enhance content creation and usage as well as making sure that the right individuals are rewarded appropriately for their contributions – while the non-performing people don't get the same rewards.

All in all, Fuze Suite is definitely worth the evaluation and enhanced consideration when looking for a Social Business platform – as long as it matches all other requirements for compliance, security, and integration.