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Executive Summary: Lithium Social CRM Suite

On-Demand Platform for Supporting
Customer Communities

By Matthew D. Lees

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December 17, 2009

NETTING IT OUT

Lithium Technologies' Social CRM platform is an impressive set of SaaS applications—forums, blogs, private messaging, an idea exchange (for crowdsourcing), a wiki-like collaboration system (the Tribal Knowledge Base), polls, and more—interconnected via member profiles, search and tagging, ratings and rankings (via Lithium's industry-leading reputation system), and a variety of other integrated tools and services. Lithium's moderation and administrative tools work well to help community managers and others maintain a productive and friendly environment, and its greatly improved analytics and reporting systems can help ensure the community's overall health and impact on the bottom line.

But even these items are just the starting point, as the complete package includes a great many other pieces and parts, some of which come at additional cost, and all of which are explored and discussed in the full version of this report. Of particular note are Lithium Studio (for getting the layout and content of each community page just the way you want it), Lithium Content Discovery (for moderating and managing massive sets of user-generated content), Lithium Mobile 2.0 (no download required), and an extensive set of integration points to connect your community with your other business systems and with the greater Social Web.

Lithium's customer base has historically skewed toward high-tech and telecom companies, which used the platform largely for peer-to-peer service and support. That's fine, and it certainly makes sense considering the platform's forums-centric origins. But Lithium's current incarnation supports not only such communities (which it continues to do well) but also many other social media use cases that span other vertical markets, such as media and publishing, consumer products, retail, and services industries.

The key factor in deciding whether Lithium is right for you has less to do with the business you're in and more to do with the size of your customer base. Lithium Social CRM is best suited for organizations with a lot of customers (or users, readers, subscribers, etc.). That's not because of Lithium's not insignificant price tag, but because taking advantage of many of the platform's benefits simply requires large numbers of participants. In other words, you need a crowd for crowdsourcing to be effective. For Lithium, the baseline is on the order of 5,000 (eventual) registered users (so your customer base would need to be substantially larger than that, as not all customers will register).

If your customer base is sizable enough, and your organization can provide the necessary resources (particularly a dedicated community manager), we recommend Lithium for your short list of online community platforms.

INTRODUCTION TO EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This executive summary contains excerpts from our 50-page Product Review of Lithium's Social CRM Suite. That report discusses the methodology we use to evaluate online community platforms, and discusses in detail how—and how well—our 33 evaluation criteria are addressed by the Social CRM Suite. Please refer to that report¹ for a more thorough discussion of Lithium's platform.

EVALUATING LITHIUM

Building a Community Using Lithium

To build a successful online customer community—whether your customers are looking primarily for answers to questions, for fellowship, for opportunities to interact with your brand, to investigate a potential purchase, for fun, or for something else—it is crucial to match your business goals to the technology platform you use. But ever-increasing expectations from more and more socially aware customers, and the increased need for efficient workflows and integrations, make it especially challenging to determine what's best for your company and your customers. Our product reviews look to help with that decision by providing in-depth analysis on relevant online community platforms and the companies that sell and support them.

The full version of this report² applies our online community evaluation criteria to one of the leading community platforms on the market from Lithium Technologies. An update of our 2006 review, it focuses on Lithium's core product and add-on applications as they are available today, with some discussion of soon-to-launch tools and interfaces.

Some key things to note about Lithium are:

- It is an **on-demand, enterprise-ready platform** that supports some of the largest communities on the Internet.

¹ See "[Lithium Social CRM Suite: On-Demand Platform for Supporting Customer Communities](#)," by Matthew D. Lees, November 19, 2009.

² Ibid.

- It is an **integrated suite of community and social components**, including discussion forums, blogs, private messaging, crowdsourcing, collaboration and knowledge management, reputation management, search and tagging, analytics, and more.
- The company provides a variety of **professional service offerings** that complement its technology platform (some of which are part of every Lithium deployment).

OVERVIEW OF LITHIUM TECHNOLOGIES

Lithium Technologies, Inc. was founded in 2001 in order to bring to a wider market the community platform developed in 1997 for online game players (including Gamers.com) by its founders, Michel Thouati and Lyle Fong. Michel Thouati has long left the company, but original CTO Lyle Fong has been leading the company as CEO since 2006.

Since 2001, the Emeryville, CA-based company has raised \$21 million through two rounds of investment in 2007 and 2008. It has also grown to over 100 employees, acquired one company (Keibi Technologies), opened up offices in England and Switzerland, and recently reported 80 percent growth in new monthly recurring revenue year-over-year.

CUSTOMERS

With over 130 customers, Lithium has clients that span a large number of market segments, including entertainment, high-tech, media, retail, and telecommunications. Due to the large feature set and relatively high price point, Lithium's customers tend to be large companies with high scalability requirements that are making a commitment to developing and leveraging their customer communities. Customers include AT&T, Barnes & Noble, Best Buy, Nintendo® of America, National Instruments, Salesforce.com, Symantec, Univision, and Verizon.

SERVICES

Lithium offers a variety of professional services that complement its platform.

- **Strategic Services.** Consulting around long- and short-term community and social media strategy,

business alignment, technology architecture, and planning/roadmap development.

- **Launch Services.** Business and technical services to prepare for the launch of an online community (see box below). Addresses community management, design and branding, custom technical development and integration, and training. (Such launch services are part of all Lithium deployments, followed by check-ins every six months.)
- **Management and Optimization Services.** Customer support through several channels; community management, moderation, and administration; and benchmarks, analytics, and recommendations based on best practices.

PRODUCTS

Lithium's product, the Social CRM Suite, is an integrated set of applications to support customer communication and collaboration. It also comes with a variety of integration points for extending the platform and connecting it to external sites and systems.

CORE COMPONENTS. These are the platform's underlying pieces and parts that primarily (1) help users discover, consume, and manage content, as well as control their identity and community experience, and (2) help community managers, moderators, and administrators configure and maintain the community, engage members, and ensure an enjoyable and productive community experience. The core components include private messaging, search, reputation system (ratings and rankings), member profiles, member roles and permissioning, and moderation and administration tools.

CUSTOMER COMMUNITY APPLICATIONS. These are the various applications that support communication and collaboration, such as discussion forums, blogs, chat, Lithium Ideas, the Tribal Knowledge Base, and more.

INTEGRATION POINTS. Integration is one of the hottest topics today in social media. Through a variety of integration points—including Web-based configuration, Single Sign-On (SSO) libraries, RSS and XML for exporting of content, a REST API, pre-

built integrations, and more—Lithium provides ample options for integrating and extending its platform.

NEW FEATURES AND HIGHLIGHTS

Here we discuss several highlights of the platform and provide our take on some of Lithium's new features.

TRIBAL KNOWLEDGE BASE. Lithium's take on community-based knowledge management is demonstrated by its recently launched Tribal Knowledge Base. It's not quite a wiki, and it's not a typical corporate-style knowledgebase system. Rather, it's a way to generate accepted knowledge through user collaboration and workflow. And, because it's an integrated part of the overall community, the information contained within is easily discoverable by all members through search and navigation.

The Tribal Knowledge Base leverages Lithium's reputation engine to set access rights and permission levels, to define workflow, and to ensure that members who participate in the creation and perfection of articles receive appropriate credit.

As you'd expect, new Knowledge Base articles can be started from scratch within the Knowledge Base application. But we really like how Lithium made it easy to create an article from an existing forum post or Idea Exchange idea. When an article is ready for prime time, the "Save & Publish" button is clicked to send it live. (This action is permission dependent, giving companies control over the quality of published—and revised—articles.)

LITHIUM IDEAS. This is Lithium's crowdsourcing application for posting, discussing, and voting on ideas. Because Lithium Ideas is integrated into the platform, it leverages the same administrative tools, search engine, analytics capabilities, reputation system, and moderation workflow. This integration results in a good user experience and also makes it easy to manage.

Submitting ideas is easy, as are voting on and commenting on others' ideas. Members can also attach files to their ideas and set up notifications to be alerted when someone comments on one of your ideas. Because ideas are tied to the community members who create them, usernames are forever linked to their ideas, an important part of the recognition and rewards aspect of the application.

Getting to Launch – Lithium Launch Services

Implementing an online community platform isn't like installing a software application like Microsoft Office. Even relatively easy-to-use platforms such as Groupsites, Ning, and vBulletin need some degree of planning and configuration. And, of course, getting a successful community off the ground requires more than just technology; it will only happen if the right human resources and business practices are in place.

The process for planning and launching an online community isn't part of our formal product review, as it's separate from the platform itself and more challenging to review consistently across vendors. Yet the launch process is intimately intertwined with the platform and the company behind it, so we feel it bears some discussion.

To get as thorough an understanding as possible of the Lithium platform, we went through a typical launch process over several weeks. (All Lithium customers go through this process, which comes with no additional cost.) We participated in the same types and number of meetings that an actual customer would, filled out the same forms, read through the same documentation, and attended the same online training programs. We were also assigned a Launch Project Manager, who took us through the requisite stages and steps. The end result of all this was indeed our own branded and built-out community site, with full access and permissions to all administrative functions.

Although this was admittedly a simulated launch, going through this process did underscore the importance of such a process in being as prepared as possible when the community eventually goes live.

Our Take on Lithium's Launch Process

We like that Lithium has a specific job function, the Launch Product Manager, who is dedicated to customers for those four to six weeks (or longer, if the community has special requirements) leading up to launch. This is a separate role from the Customer Success Manager, who maintains the ongoing relationship post launch.

We were also impressed with the overall structure of the process, which includes well-defined agendas and materials for each meeting. Lithium has the timing and milestones down. The process takes customers through the following main tactical areas:

- 1. Promotion** – How will people find out about the community, whether from your Web site, email programs, or other promotional efforts?
- 2. User Management** – Setting expectations on who will be doing what, including what the responsibilities and workflows will be.
- 3. "Superuser" Management** – How to identify, recognize, and reward the essential most active and influential users who, though probably only 1% of your community, will be generating around 30% of its content.
- 4. Measurement** – How to measure the important things that will keep the community vibrant and show that business goals are being met.

In addition to covering a wide range of topics, Lithium's launch process also includes an appropriately deep dive into the details of getting a successful community going. Such a process is part preparation and part education; Lithium does very well on both fronts. It emphasizes the importance of the Community Manager role, looks to assuage fears and concerns (whether technological, sociological, or business-related), and offers best practices at every turn. In our estimation, this process takes clients on a journey that should prepare any customer to launch a community on its platform with a very high chance for success.

And because ideas and all their meta-data are indexed in Lithium's search, relevant ideas will show up in keyword searches (tags and labels also help with idea discovery). Beyond this, the main ideas page displays three tabs to give the community a glimpse of what's happening in the Ideas ecosystem. These are "Hot Ideas" (which shows all submitted ideas, ranked by how quickly they are accumulating new votes at the time), "New Ideas" (which shows the recently submitted ideas), and "Top Ideas" (which shows the highest ranked ideas).

LITHIUM CONTENT DISCOVERY (LCD). Lithium's June 2009 acquisition of Keibi Technologies brought a new automated technology to Lithium's product mix. Keibi's platform is now packaged as an add-on application, Lithium Content Discovery. Currently available as a standalone system, Lithium's development team is working to integrate it into the Lithium platform.

Lithium Content Discovery scans and classifies large data sets of user-generated content (UGC), whether text, images, or video. Based on a proprietary content ranking system as well as business rules worked out with individual clients, it processes content that can then be moderated and analyzed.

While there is some overlap between the moderation tools built into Lithium and those available through Lithium Content Discovery, LCD moderation is really designed for handling large volumes of user-generated content in which it is particularly important to deal with the most suspect content first. Lithium's built-in moderation tools have been designed for a different use case, in which there are expected to be a relatively small amount of inappropriate content, or where moderators are expected to be part of the community.

LITHIUM INSIGHTS. Lithium Insights is a set of analytics products and services that look to provide actionable information on community health and business metrics. It includes the Community Health Index (CHI) and the Lithium Command Center.

- **Community Health Index.** Lithium's Community Health Index (CHI) compiles six characteristics of community activity with an eye toward benchmarking, measuring, and improving community "health." (Among other reports, Lithium's Community Health Report, which is based

on its CHI, will soon be more accessible when the Lithium Command Center completes its roll-out.)

- **Lithium Command Center.** Lithium's Command Center is its new analytics hub. Through a partnership with Business Objects, Lithium has developed an extensive analytical tool set that allows for more extensive slicing and dicing of community data. These tools perform analysis on the social networks within communities, and can, through various calculations such as eigenvector centrality (which is used by Google in its PageRank™ algorithm), provide actionable information on community members' participation and influence.

LITHIUM STUDIO. Taking layout and content to a new dimension is the recently launched Lithium Studio configuration management tool. It's a set of complementary tools for laying out and configuring your community through a well-designed graphical user interface. All Lithium community pages are XML-configurable, and Lithium Studio gives administrators direct control over the layout and content of these pages through a drag-and-drop interface.

We like that Lithium Studio offers both Basic and Advanced modes. Basic mode, which will be satisfactory for most customers, provides control over page structure and page content based on the options that Lithium provides. In Advanced mode, all bets are off; here you can use the Freemarker template engine to manually manipulate page templates to get deeper control over community pages.

SOCIAL WEB CONNECT. This is a set of integrations and applications to connect social activity throughout the Web with the community and vice-versa. Lithium's primary Social Web Connect application is its recently launched Twitter integration, which captures and displays relevant tweets in the community. An administrator enters a search string in the Twitter Settings area, and all tweets with that string appear in the designated area of the community. What's more powerful than just displaying these tweets, however, is the way that those with the requisite permission can turn appropriate tweets into forum posts, to get a discussion started around them. They can also respond to the original tweeter, too, to let them know that their post has been used in this

way. (We like Lithium's Twitter Badges, as well, which lets users strut their stuff by helping them create a custom Twitter background that dynamically displays their community rank, number of posts and kudos, and more.)

CRM CONNECT. This is a “framework” technology (actually a set of extensibility end-points) on which integrations with external systems can be built. To date, Lithium has built CRM Connect integrations for RightNow Technologies and Salesforce.com.

LITHIUM MOBILE 2.0. Lithium's mobile application promises to go miles beyond its current 1.0 version. We particularly like that Lithium Mobile 2.0 detects the brand and model of your mobile device and customizes the application accordingly. Whether you're on a BlackBerry, iPhone, or one of dozens of other common devices, there's nothing to download. Just go to the community URL, sign in, and you're ready to go.

The interface has also been optimized for mobile devices, and Mobile 2.0 users can get a pretty full community experience, as they can participate in just about every aspect of the community.

CONCLUSION

Overall, Lithium's products offer an impressive array of features and capabilities. Just about every aspect of the interface is configurable by an administrator. Its support for managing user roles and group permissions, both directly and indirectly (through rankings) is excellent. Its products are well designed and easy to use, and it gives members ample control over their own community experience. Its moderation management system is an effective tool for maintaining a comfortable environment. And the system is stable, extensible, and scalable.

Specific items worth mentioning include:

- **FEATURE DEPTH AND BREADTH.** The depth and breadth of Lithium's components—forums, blogs, private messaging, Lithium Ideas, the Tribal Knowledge Base, and so on—as well as the interplay between them, are pretty much unparalleled in the industry. It's an extensive list of applications, features, connections, and integrations that support just about any community use case.

- **INTEGRATION AND EXTENSIBILITY.** Lithium provides many ways to integrate and extend its platform with your other online properties, your other business applications and data sets, and the greater social Web.
- **SCALABILITY.** Lithium powers some of the largest customer communities and social sites on the Internet.
- **ACTIVE MEMBER ENGAGEMENT.** Lithium provides the tools to engage your most active and influential customers, the people that Lithium calls “superusers.” Kudos, **accepted** solutions, roles and rankings, access and permission (based on these roles and rankings), all help ensure that these crucial members have their customer scenarios successfully met.
- **REPORTING, ANALYTICS, AND BENCHMARKING.** Lithium's reporting and analytic tools help community managers ensure a healthy community, and help business sponsors ensure that business goals are met. Because it's an on-demand platform, Lithium helps its customer leverage its 10-plus years of aggregate community data, by providing useful benchmarks.
- **MOBILE ACCESS.** Use of mobile devices is only increasing. Supporting the participation of community members—especially your most active and influential ones—through their devices of choice, will be a more important objective over time. We see Lithium's Mobile 2.0 application as having a lot of legs.
- **SUPPORT, TRAINING, AND DOCUMENTATION.** We applaud Lithium for providing many different support channels to community managers, moderators, and administrators. These include all aspects of its Launch Service, context-sensitive help throughout the administrative interface, a separate administrative FAQ (which could be more thorough), product documentation, and a library of online training modules. In addition, its own customer community, the Lithosphere (<http://lithosphere.lithium.com>), is a good source

of peer-to-peer support and a place to submit ideas and feature requests.

Weaknesses

- **BLAST EMAILS.** Although Lithium provides strong email capabilities around alerts and notifications, you need to go through a multi-step workaround to send emails to particular groups within the community.
- **ADMINISTRATOR EXPERIENCE.** It can be tough to find your way around so many administrative tools and options. We'd like to see a more clearly organized and streamlined admin interface.

Other Considerations

Organizations considering Lithium may want to take the following items into consideration as well.

- **GETTING TO LAUNCH.** Setting up online community software is not like installing Microsoft Office. You don't just run an install app and watch it go. Whatever platform you use, there's a lot of work to be done well before the community goes live. This includes doing some strategic planning based on business goals, identifying and training appropriate people, and defining branding requirements, in addition to configuring your technology platform. (Lithium's Launch Services, which are included as part of every Lithium deployment, address these items.)
- **DEPLOYMENT MODE.** If it's a non-negotiable requirement that you host the community on your own servers, Lithium is not the platform for you. Most of the reasons for desiring on-premise deployment, though, are falling away over time. For example, there seem to be fewer security concerns over SaaS applications (and cloud computing in general), and tools such API sets allow for customized integration and workflow previously available only if the platform was behind your firewall. Common benefits of SaaS deployment include easier and more seamless upgrades, less reliance on IT, and the ability to determine aggregate benchmark analytics.

- **EARLY VERSIONS OF NEW APPLICATIONS.** Lithium's product and service teams have been busy, launching new tools and services (Lithium Content Discovery, Lithium Insights, Lithium Studio), applications (Lithium Ideas, Tribal Knowledge Base, and Lithium Mobile 2.0), and integrations (Salesforce.com, Twitter). As with any new offerings, there are inevitable kinks to be worked out and enhancements to be made.
- **YOUR CUSTOMER BASE.** Lithium is best used in large scale communities, with a minimum of perhaps 5,000 potential members. If your membership, which will be some percentage of your overall customer base, is much below that, you won't be leveraging what Lithium has to offer. (In other words, crowdsourcing only works if there's a crowd...)

THE BOTTOM LINE

Although not an inexpensive system, Lithium offers a product that few others can compete with for functionality, ease of use, scalability, extensibility, and member engagement. This last item is perhaps Lithium's most important, as every aspect of the platform is designed with social intent; it's not just a set of applications, but a system of interconnected components built to get customers interacting with each other about your stuff, creating value for themselves and you. And it's been developed with particular attention to support, motivate, and reward your most influential and active customers, those superusers (to use Lithium's parlance) who are the real engine of the community.

If you've got a customer base sizable enough to take advantage of what it has to offer, we recommend Lithium for your short list of online community platforms.

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MATTHEW D. LEES is a Consultant and Vice President at the Patricia Seybold Group. He brings over 15 years of experience in helping organizations leverage technology to build stronger relationships with customers. As an Analyst in the group's Customers.com Research Service, his current focus is on customer and partner communities and social media. He specializes in the business impact of social technology, particularly its ROI, and the related organizational challenges.

Matthew was previously the principal of Lees Consulting, a provider of strategic and tactical services to businesses and not-for-profit organizations on their use of technology and the Internet. In 1996 he was a founding member of MaMaMedia Inc., the premier independent Web site for children, where, as Vice President of Customer Service and Relationship Management, he and his team grew MaMaMedia's online community to more than 5 million registered users.

With two degrees in physics (MS Georgia Tech, Atlanta GA; BS Trinity College, Hartford, CT), Matthew has taught physics and astronomy, developed virtual reality games and museum exhibits, and designed the optical systems for medical blood analyzers.



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The CEO and founder, Patricia Seybold, is the New York Times best-selling author of *Customers.com* and *The Customer Revolution*. Patty's latest book, *Outside Innovation*, is [available now](#).

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