

How a Service Company Turns Customers into Fans:

A Relationship-Based Innovation Case from Lieblang

Iryna Tschatchina | ISPIIM Innovation Conference 2026 | Granada

1. The Structural Problem

This case examines how the service company Lieblang addresses a structural problem common across service industries: despite high operational quality, companies remain interchangeable and struggle to build lasting customer loyalty.

Lieblang operates in facility services — a sector where contracts are typically renewed based on price comparison rather than relationship value. Services are difficult to differentiate, margins are under constant pressure, and customer decisions are driven primarily by cost.

While performance levels were consistently strong and customer satisfaction metrics were high, the company observed limited emotional attachment, weak referral dynamics, and persistent price sensitivity. It became evident that further improvements in operational efficiency or service quality would not fundamentally change this pattern.

The core insight: the problem was not the service. The problem was the relationship logic underlying it.

2. The Shift: Relationship Design as Innovation

The key reorientation was to treat relationships not as a byproduct of service delivery, but as a deliberate field of innovation — distinct from both process optimization and marketing.

This distinction matters. Existing approaches to customer loyalty in service industries typically operate through two channels: (1) improving operational performance, or (2) increasing communication touchpoints. Both leave the underlying relationship dynamic unchanged. What Lieblang pursued instead was a systematic redesign of how relationships are built and maintained in day-to-day operations — at the level of behavior, structure, and organizational culture.

The starting point was an observation, not a strategy: some of Lieblang's longest customer relationships had not been deliberately built — they had simply never been broken. One had been uninterrupted for more than seven decades, surviving multiple ownership changes, market shifts, and competitive alternatives. No fan strategy had produced this. No campaign had sustained it. It had persisted because of how people had behaved toward each other, consistently, over time. That raised a question: what would it look like to do this intentionally — and at scale?

We use the term 'fan' to describe a specific customer state: customers who actively recommend, tolerate friction without immediate exit, and maintain relationships independent of price being the primary driver. This is operationally distinct from satisfaction, loyalty scores, or NPS — it describes a behavioral pattern, not an attitude.

3. The Model: Five Stages of Relationship Development

To structure this approach, Lieblang introduced a relationship model based on five stages: Attention, Trust, Connection, Identification, and Advocacy.

These stages differ from conventional customer journey or loyalty ladder frameworks in one critical respect: each stage defines organizational and behavioral requirements — not communication or marketing milestones. The question at each stage is not 'what do we say?' but 'how do we act?'

Trust: Continuity as a structural principle. Customers were assigned fixed contact persons and stable operational teams. The goal was not familiarity through frequency, but predictability through consistency.

Connection: Regular quality conversations replaced purely operational communication. The focus shifted from task reporting to mutual understanding of context, priorities, and emerging needs.

Identification: Standardized service packages were replaced with individually adapted solutions — reinforcing the customer's experience that the company understands their specific situation, not just their contract.

Advocacy: Internal alignment was treated as a prerequisite for external relationship quality. Leadership behavior and internal communication formats were adapted on the assumption that how employees relate to the organization shapes how they relate to customers.

Note on causality: Lieblang did not pursue fan creation as a communication campaign. The causal chain is: Culture → Behavior → Relationship → Perceived Value → Loyalty → Fan Behavior. Communication follows — it does not lead.

4. Results: What Relationship Competence Can and Cannot Change

A critical distinction shapes how results must be read in this context: Lieblang serves two structurally different customer segments — clients subject to mandatory public or corporate tendering requirements, and clients with discretionary procurement authority. Relationship quality operates differently in each.

Segment A: Tendering-bound customers (public sector and large corporations)

In this segment, procurement decisions are governed by formal tendering processes. Relationship competence cannot circumvent or replace these structures — nor should it. What it can influence is different: whether a company is invited to participate in a tender, how the service specification is framed (often informed by the incumbent's behavior during the contract), and how the client behaves during contract execution — particularly in situations involving problems, deviations, or change requests.

In practice, Lieblang observed that customers in this segment with stronger relationship depth showed notably higher tolerance in conflict situations, more collaborative behavior during contract renegotiations, and a greater tendency to frame tenders in ways that reflected their actual operational experience — rather than purely price-driven criteria.

Relationship competence in tendering contexts does not produce loyalty in the conventional sense. It produces behavioral goodwill — which is both rarer and more durable.

Segment B: Discretionary customers (private companies without mandatory tendering)

In this segment, the full effect of relationship-based differentiation becomes measurable. Over a 36-month observation period, Lieblang recorded the following directional shifts:

Referral behavior: The share of new customer contacts initiated through direct recommendation increased from approximately 11% to 27%. This shift was most pronounced among mid-market clients where fixed contact persons and structured quality conversations had been consistently maintained.

Contract duration: Average relationship length in this segment extended from 2.4 to 4.1 years. Churn driven by competitor pricing offers declined most noticeably in accounts where fixed contact structures had been in place for more than 18 months.

Price renegotiation behavior: The proportion of customers initiating active price comparison processes at renewal declined by approximately 35%. In structured feedback conversations, customers consistently cited reliability of contact and responsiveness — not service price — as their primary reason for renewal.

Across both segments, one pattern held consistently: the service itself did not change. The innovation lies in the reconfiguration of how value is created — and where in the relationship that value becomes visible.

5. Implications: Relationship Competence as Strategic Capability

The case demonstrates that in service industries, sustainable differentiation cannot be achieved through operational performance alone. At a certain level of quality, further improvement yields diminishing returns in customer loyalty. The variable that changes the dynamic is relationship competence — understood as the organizational ability to build, maintain, and develop relationships systematically.

This requires treating relationship design as a management discipline: with deliberate structures, behavioral standards, internal alignment mechanisms, and feedback loops. It cannot be delegated to a communication function or resolved through a loyalty program.

Critically, this model does not ignore structural procurement constraints — it accounts for them. The insight is not that relationships override institutional processes. It is that relationship quality determines what is possible within and around those processes: the nature of the invitation, the behavior during delivery, the tolerance in conflict, and the framing of the next cycle.

The broader implication extends beyond facility services: any service business operating in a commoditized market faces the same structural choice — compete on price and efficiency, or invest

in relationship competence as the primary differentiator. Lieblang's case suggests that the second path is not only viable but measurably productive — and that it requires a different kind of organizational thinking, not a different kind of marketing.