

4-15-2026

Beyond Social Media: Effective Innovative Strategies for Small Cleaning Services to Engage Decision-Makers and Secure Contracts

Danielle Edwesa Gaskins
Walden University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies Collection at ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu.

Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Danielle Gaskins

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Kathleen Andrews, Committee Chairperson, Doctor of Business Administration
Faculty

Dr. Franz Gottlieb, Committee Member, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2026

Abstract

Beyond Social Media: Effective Innovative Strategies for Small Cleaning Services to

Engage Decision-Makers and Secure Contracts

by

Danielle Gaskins

MBA, Keiser University, 2023

BS, Computer Information Systems, 2016

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

April 2026

Abstract

Small cleaning service businesses often encounter challenges when attempting to reach decision-makers and obtain commercial contracts. Small cleaning service business leaders are concerned with securing contracts because the continual acquisition of agreements underpins both business stability and growth. Grounded in the service-dominant logic, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore strategies small cleaning business leaders use to engage decision-makers and win contracts without relying on the use of social media marketing. The participants were five leaders from small cleaning businesses in the United States who had successfully secured contracts through alternative engagement strategies. Data were gathered using semistructured interviews and analyzed through Braun and Clarke's six-step reflexive thematic analysis. Five primary themes emerged: (a) building client relationships through personal engagement, (b) leveraging strategic networking for growth, (c) demonstrating excellence in communication and attentive listening, (d) collaborative value creation through strategic partnerships, and (e) business initiative and proactive outreach. A key recommendation is for small cleaning business leaders to adopt structured networking practices, including active participation in local chambers of commerce and industry events, to build relationships with decision-makers and strengthen contract acquisition efforts. The potential implications for positive social change involve small cleaning service business leaders adopting relationship-focused engagement strategies, which may improve business sustainability, create additional employment opportunities, and promote economic participation within local communities.

Beyond Social Media: Effective Innovative Strategies for Small Cleaning Services to
Engage Decision-Makers and Secure Contracts

by

Danielle Gaskins

MBA, Keiser University, 2023

BS, Computer Information Systems, 2016

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

April 2026

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the sources of guidance, strength, and support who have stood by me throughout this journey. This achievement was made possible by your unwavering encouragement and my own perseverance.

To my parents, family, and loved ones: thank you for your endless support, encouragement, and sacrifices. Your belief in me has been the foundation of my resilience, helping me navigate every challenge.

I am deeply grateful to my friends and mentors for sharing their wisdom, motivation, and guidance. Your belief in my potential inspired me to persevere through every difficulty.

Finally, to all dreamers, entrepreneurs, and future scholars: may this work remind you that perseverance, dedication, and commitment lead to success. Keep striving for greatness and believe in your ability to achieve your goals.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the Most High for the strength and guidance I have received throughout this journey. My committee members, Dr. Andrews and Dr. Musil, played a pivotal role in shaping this research—their dedication, feedback, and thorough reviews were invaluable. Thank you to the business leaders and entrepreneurs who shared their experiences and contributed to enriching this project. I also thank my colleagues for their insight and advice, which kept me moving forward even when I wanted to quit. Special thanks to my parents, siblings, friends, and loved ones for your encouragement, love, and inspiration. I stand here today empowered by every challenge, embracing the future with gratitude and a sense of purpose.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	iv
Section 1: Foundation of the Project.....	1
Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose	2
Research Question	3
Assumptions and Limitations	3
Assumptions.....	3
Limitations	4
Transition	4
Section 2: The Literature Review	6
A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature.....	6
Application to Applied Business Problem.....	9
Conceptual Framework.....	11
Contrasting Theories.....	13
Themes Found in the Literature.....	17
Networking Strategies for Contract Acquisition.....	18
Strategic Partnerships in Business Growth.....	20
Technology and Automation in Service Delivery	21
Service Differentiation and Customization.....	23
Trust and Relationship Building.....	24
Gaps in the Literature.....	27

Transition	28
Section 3: Research Project Methodology	29
Project Ethics	29
Nature of The Study	31
Population and Sampling	32
Data Collection Activities	33
Data Analysis Method.....	35
Data Organization and Analysis Techniques	37
Reliability and Validity.....	39
Transition and Summary.....	41
Section 4: Findings and Conclusions	43
Presentation of Findings	43
Theme 1 Client Engagement Through Personal Connection.....	47
Theme 2 Strategic Networking as a Growth Catalyst.....	54
Theme 3 Communication Excellence and Active Listening.....	62
Theme 4 Collaborative Value Creation	69
Theme 5 Business Initiative and Proactive Outreach	77
Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice	84
Implications for Social Change.....	86
Recommendations for Further Research.....	87
Conclusion	89
References.....	90

Appendix: Interview Questions99

List of Tables

Table 1. Summary of Literature Key Themes	26
Table 2. Participant Coverage Across Dominant Themes	44
Table 3. Themes and Sample Codes	45
Table 4. Themes and Coded References	46
Table 5. Theme 1: Client Engagement Through Personal Connection	48
Table 6. Theme 2: Strategic Networking as a Growth Catalyst	56
Table 7. Theme 3: Communication Excellence and Active Listening	64
Table 8. Theme 4: Collaborative Value Creation	71
Table 9. Theme 5: Business Initiative and Proactive Outreach	79

Section 1: Foundation of the Project

Background of the Problem

Small cleaning service businesses are pivotal contributors to local economies and job creation, yet they face substantial barriers in securing commercial contracts. These challenges stem from limited access to decision-makers, intense competition from larger, resource-rich firms, and an overreliance on conventional marketing methods, such as social media and traditional advertising (Wang & Huang, 2023). Traditional approaches, such as printed flyers, local newspaper ads, and word-of-mouth referrals, might raise awareness but rarely provide the strategic depth or credibility needed to thrive in business-to-business (B2B) environments (Turner & Endres, 2021). Without innovative engagement strategies, small cleaning businesses struggle to establish trust and form meaningful relationships with potential clients—factors crucial to securing contracts in the highly competitive commercial cleaning industry (Alsaawi et al., 2021; Chen & Chen, 2020). Moreover, limited access to influential networks, obstacles in developing mutually beneficial partnerships, and challenges in differentiating their value propositions could severely restrict the growth and sustainability of these firms (Garcia & Moraga, 2020). To remain competitive, small cleaning services have to move beyond passive outreach and embrace bold, relationship-centered strategies that demonstrated their unique strengths and reliability.

Overcoming these barriers is not only crucial for the survival and growth of small cleaning service companies but also for strengthening local economies and supporting job creation (Bryson et al., 2021). By implementing targeted, innovative strategies that focus

on relationship-building, trust, and customized service offerings, small businesses dramatically increase their ability to engage decision-makers and secure lucrative contracts, often outpacing competitors who relied solely on passive marketing. In this project, I focused on proven approaches that enable small cleaning service leaders to overcome traditional limitations and establish themselves as indispensable partners to commercial clients. Evidence showed that service customization, proactive networking, and trust-based engagement consistently led to higher contract acquisition rates and long-term business success (Beuren et al., 2020; Zhang & Li, 2022). For those ready to take action, adopting these best practices is a transformative step toward achieving sustainable growth and industry leadership (Ranjan & Read, 2021).

I used the service-dominant logic (SDL) framework to gain a perspective for this analysis by focusing on value co-creation, service differentiation, and relationship building as elements of sustainable business strategies (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). SDL encourages moving away from one-way transactional marketing toward engagement strategies that involved clients as participants in shaping service experiences (Akaka & Vargo, 2014; Edvardsson et al., 2020). Small cleaning service business leaders can use these concepts to enhance their competitive position, increase contract acquisition, and support long-term growth through adaptive, value-driven service models (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2022).

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

Small cleaning service businesses face challenges in identifying effective strategies to engage decision-makers and secure contracts without using social media

marketing (Turner & Endres, 2021; Wang & Huang, 2023). In this qualitative, pragmatic inquiry, I examined strategies used by small cleaning service business leaders to engage decision-makers and secure contracts through channels other than social media. In this project, I explored small cleaning service business leaders in the United States who obtained contracts without primarily depending on social media.

Research Question

What effective and innovative strategies can small cleaning service business leaders use to engage decision-makers and secure contracts through methods other than social media marketing?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are fundamental beliefs in research that researchers cannot fully verify but must acknowledge for transparency (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). I assumed that participants would provide honest and accurate responses during semistructured interviews. The reliability of participant responses was important for generating meaningful findings in qualitative research. I also assumed that small business leaders who had successfully engaged decision-makers could offer insights relevant to other small service firms under similar conditions. Additionally, I assumed that decision-makers in the cleaning services industry considered relationship-building and service differentiation when selecting contract providers, consistent with the SDL framework (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). To address potential risks associated with these assumptions, strategies such as purposive sampling, data triangulation, and

member checking are used, consistent with qualitative research best practices (Nowell et al., 2017).

Limitations

Limitations are inherent weaknesses or constraints in a project that I could not control (Garcia & Moraga, 2020). One such limitation was the research's geographic scope, which might have limited the generalizability of the findings to small cleaning businesses outside the United States. Additionally, relying on self-reported data introduces risks of memory inaccuracies or social desirability bias during interviews (Beuren et al., 2020). I designed the pragmatic qualitative inquiry to prioritize contextual understanding over broad generalizability, thereby making the results most applicable to comparable service-based environments (Faulkner & Faulkner, 2024). I provided practical, actionable strategies for small business leaders seeking to enhance engagement outcomes and secure contracts.

Transition

Small cleaning service businesses face challenges in securing contracts and establishing relationships with key decision-makers. Although social media marketing can enhance brand visibility, it often fails to facilitate interpersonal connections and trust-building that support the development of long-term business relationships (Bryson et al., 2021; Zhang & Li, 2022). I used the SDL framework to investigate the value of co-creation and collaborative service experiences in securing contracts for small cleaning businesses.

Section 2 includes a review of the academic literature on small service-based enterprises and their approaches to engaging decision-makers outside social media contexts. This includes analysis of networking, strategic partnerships, technology integration, and trust-building strategies, considered within the framework of SDL.

Section 2: The Literature Review

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

In this literature review, I examine existing research on small cleaning service businesses and their strategies for engaging decision-makers beyond traditional social media marketing. I considered business development approaches, including networking, service differentiation, strategic partnerships, customer engagement practices, and the effective use of technology and automation. I utilized the SDL conceptual framework as a theoretical perspective to understand value co-creation through client collaboration, trust-building, and customized service experiences (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). I synthesized and analyzed relevant research findings to provide an overview of scholarship related to the research question.

In this literature review, I present key themes and theoretical considerations relevant to this project. I begin with a summary of SDL and its significance for service-based small business operations, followed by a discussion of key engagement areas, including professional networking, service customization, relationship building, technology adoption, and strategic partnership development. I address these aspects because they are relevant to increasing visibility, building client trust, and securing B2B contracts outside social media channels. I employ comparative analysis to identify points of agreement and disagreement among scholars, as well as gaps in the literature that might have warranted further investigation.

I designed a structured search process to locate current, relevant, and scholarly sources for this literature review. I used EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Google Scholar,

NDLTD, and OATD to search and cross-reference foundational works, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the topic. I combined keywords and Boolean operators to identify studies aligned with the research problem. I used terms such as *small cleaning businesses, cleaning services contract, decision-maker engagement, effective social media, effective innovative strategies for cleaning services companies, relationship marketing, non-digital marketing strategies, technology adoption in SMEs, and trust-building in B2B services*. For example, searches included phrases such as *cleaning services AND contract acquisition AND networking and SMEs AND service-dominant logic AND value co-creation*.

The initial search returned several hundred articles. I applied only peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books, and dissertations that directly address small businesses, service-dominant logic, or engagement strategies, and excluded trade publications, blogs, and opinion pieces. After applying these filters, I retained just over 100 relevant sources for further analysis.

Ninety percent of these sources were peer-reviewed, and eighty-eight percent were published within the last 5 years (2020–2025) to ensure the literature reflected recent developments. I included foundational works, such as Vargo and Lusch's service-dominant logic, to provide conceptual grounding. The literature reviewed encompassed both qualitative and quantitative research, industry-specific studies, and theory, providing a comprehensive understanding of how small cleaning businesses could effectively reach decision-makers and secure contracts beyond social media marketing.

In subsequent sections of the literature review, I discuss that small service-based businesses face distinct challenges when engaging with decision-makers and acquiring contracts, including limited access to business networks, lower brand recognition, and smaller operational capacities compared to their larger competitors (Garcia & Moraga, 2020; Turner & Endres, 2021). Although social media marketing can enhance visibility, it may not establish personal connections and long-term trust required in B2B service contracting (Zhang & Li, 2022). Consequently, some researchers recommend more interactive, relationship-oriented strategies that promote value co-creation, customized service offerings, and long-term partnerships (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2022).

I organize the remainder of this literature review into four comprehensive subsections: Application to Applied Business Problem, Conceptual Framework, Contrasting Theories, and Themes Found in the Literature. In the first subsection, I explore the relevance of identified challenges to small cleaning service enterprises seeking to acquire contracts through strategies that extend beyond social media marketing. The following section presents a detailed examination of the SDL framework and critically evaluates its applicability to the central research question.

In the third subsection, I provide a comparative analysis between SDL and alternative theoretical approaches, specifically relationship marketing theory (RMT), the resource-based view (RBV), and the diffusion of innovations (DOI), thus substantiating the rationale for selecting SDL as the principal theoretical lens. In the final subsection, I synthesize the predominant themes in the literature, focusing on networking, partnership development, technology adoption, service differentiation, and trust establishment.

Together, these sections construct a strong academic foundation for the qualitative investigation I conduct in this project.

Application to Applied Business Problem

Small cleaning service businesses face challenges securing contracts in competitive environments, often dominated by larger firms with more resources, broader market reach, and established brand recognition (Turner & Endres, 2021; Wang & Huang, 2023). These smaller businesses typically employ traditional or social media marketing methods, such as posting on Instagram, distributing flyers, or utilizing basic referral systems (Park & Namkung, 2022; Zhang & Li, 2022). While these approaches can increase awareness, they infrequently generate the trust or access to decision-makers necessary for acquiring high-value commercial contracts (Zhang & Li, 2022). Factors such as limited visibility, restricted credibility, and low participation in formal networks may prevent small cleaning businesses from scaling operations or accessing procurement channels in larger organizations (Bryson et al., 2021).

A predominant reliance on social media as the primary marketing mechanism can result in overlooking alternative engagement strategies. Although platforms like Instagram and Facebook provide exposure, they may not facilitate the interpersonal connections required for trust-based and enduring business relationships (Bryson et al., 2021). Turner and Endres (2021) noted that small firms engaging in strategic networking, community involvement, and industry-related activities tend to build greater credibility compared to competitors who focus exclusively on digital tactics.

SDL offers a theoretical perspective on how organizations produce value collaboratively with customers rather than deliver it independently (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). Small cleaning service businesses that apply SDL principles often involve clients in the service delivery process through regular feedback, adaptable scheduling, and collaborative problem-solving (Edvardsson et al., 2020). Such practices build trust and enable the customization of services to better meet client needs, which may improve their competitiveness in B2B contract acquisition.

The identified business issue also involves the limited use of human-centered engagement techniques, including follow-up communications, customized proposals, and transparent pricing. Research indicates that clients are more likely to choose and continue working with providers who demonstrate attention to detail, adaptability, and a commitment to maintaining professional relationships (Garcia & Moraga, 2020). Ranjan and Read (2021) found that integrating customer relationship management tools, structured feedback processes, and personalized follow-ups enhances client satisfaction and increases the likelihood of contract renewals, particularly in sectors where trust is a key factor.

Adopting technology is another aspect of the business challenge. Despite the potential benefits of digital tools such as AI-driven scheduling, client preference tracking, and automation software, many small firms view these technologies as costly or complex to implement (Pillai et al., 2021). Nevertheless, accessible and cost-effective platforms have become available, offering options for timely updates, quality monitoring, and ongoing client communication. Organizations that use these tools can strengthen value

co-creation and differentiate themselves within competitive markets (Wang & Huang, 2023).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this project is anchored in SDL, as articulated by Vargo and Lusch (2021). SDL represents a paradigm shift from a traditional goods-centric perspective, which views value as intrinsic to tangible products, to a service-oriented model wherein value is realized through interactions between providers and clients (Muninger et al., 2023). Rather than positioning services as ancillary to goods, SDL posits that all economic exchanges are fundamentally service-based, with knowledge, skills, and relationships serving as principal sources of value (Vargo et al., 2020).

This framework is especially pertinent to service industries such as commercial cleaning, where client experiences are co-produced and shaped by reciprocal engagement (Mailani et al., 2024; Nasir et al., 2023). The SDL approach underscores that value is not generated independently by businesses and subsequently delivered to customers; rather, it emerges collaboratively during provider-client interactions (Edvardsson et al., 2020). For small commercial cleaning enterprises, this perspective advocates for a shift from transactional models to relational engagement strategies that empower clients to actively influence their service experience.

Four foundational components underpin SDL: value co-creation, service customization, relationship-building, and operant resources. Value co-creation refers to the collaborative process by which clients and providers design and refine services to

address specific needs, fostering enhanced satisfaction and loyalty (Ranjan & Read, 2021). Customization, adapting services in response to client preferences, serves as a strategic differentiator, particularly for smaller firms seeking to distinguish themselves from larger competitors offering standardized solutions (Vargo & Lusch, 2021).

Relationship-building constitutes another essential SDL tenet, redirecting focus from isolated transactions to sustained interactions that cultivate trust and foster long-term partnerships (Edvardsson et al., 2020). In small cleaning businesses, ongoing communication, systematic feedback collection, and proactive responsiveness to client concerns collectively strengthen business-client relationships. This orientation not only supports sustainable contract acquisition but also enhances opportunities for repeat engagements (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2022).

SDL further highlights the significance of intangible assets, such as expertise, knowledge, and collaborative capabilities, as key enablers of value creation through interaction (Akaka & Vargo, 2014). Unlike tangible operand resources (e.g., equipment or supplies), operant resources are dynamic and evolve continuously through repeated service encounters. For small businesses, cultivating and leveraging these intangibles via client interaction offers a pathway to competitive advantage without substantial capital expenditure (Nasir et al., 2023; Ranjan & Read, 2021).

Moreover, the SDL framework aligns closely with the pragmatic qualitative inquiry design. Both methodologies prioritize real-world applicability, context-rich learning, and practical problem-solving (Faulkner & Faulkner, 2024). Just as SDL emphasizes adaptable, co-creative service delivery, pragmatic inquiry values experiential

knowledge obtained directly from participants. This methodological and theoretical congruence advances the objective of identifying actionable business improvement strategies.

Empirical evidence confirms the relevance of SDL within small business contexts. For instance, Nasir et al. (2023) observed that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that adopted co-creation principles demonstrated greater adaptability and resilience in the face of market disruptions. Similarly, Hsiao et al. (2022) determined that organizations engaging in customer collaboration and networked innovation achieved higher client satisfaction and superior service outcomes. These findings underscore SDL's utility as a guiding framework for examining how small cleaning firms secure contracts and maintain competitive standing.

In summary, SDL repositions small cleaning businesses as active partners in co-creating tailored value experiences. This theoretical approach emphasizes the importance of establishing meaningful, interactive client relationships that extend beyond one-off marketing initiatives, thereby enhancing trust, responsiveness, and the quality of service. By prioritizing co-creation, SDL equips businesses to forge stronger customer connections and generate lasting value, ultimately supporting their success in a contract-driven service environment (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Vargo et al., 2020).

Contrasting Theories

The SDL framework serves as the basis for this project, and other theoretical perspectives that could have informed the research are also examined. The three frameworks considered in this project were relationship marketing theory (RMT), the

resource-based view (RBV), and the diffusion of innovations (DOI) theory. These theories have previously been applied in research on business growth, customer engagement, and innovation, making them potential options for guiding studies on the strategies employed by small cleaning service businesses.

However, these theories differ from SDL in several key aspects. SDL emphasizes value co-creation, service customization, and ongoing client relationships, which relate directly to the engagement strategies addressed in this research (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). RMT primarily addresses customer retention, whereas RBV focuses on internal resources rather than relational dynamics, and DOI examines the spread of innovations rather than interactions within service delivery. The following section provides a detailed description of these theories and outlines the reasons why SDL was selected for the current project.

Contrasting Theory 1: Relationship Marketing Theory

Relationship Marketing Theory (RMT) centers on the sustained development of customer relationships grounded in trust, effective communication, satisfaction, and loyalty (Albérico & Casaca, 2023). Rather than focusing solely on discrete transactions, RMT seeks to nurture enduring relationships that drive future business opportunities and ongoing customer engagement (Albers & Krafft, 2022; Utama et al., 2025). This theoretical framework is widely applied in service-oriented sectors, particularly where customer retention is crucial to profitability. Similar to SDL, RMT emphasizes the importance of relationship-building in competitive environments, making it a valuable perspective for examining how small enterprises attract and retain clients.

Nonetheless, RMT does not emphasize client involvement in the design or delivery stages of service provision. Under RMT, customers primarily act as recipients rather than active co-creators of value (Akaka & Vargo, 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). In contrast, SDL foregrounds co-creation and collaborative engagement between provider and client throughout service interactions (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). For this project, which investigates engagement strategies that extend beyond traditional marketing approaches, RMT indicates that it is limited in its capacity to analyze dynamic business-to-client interactions that influence service formation. Consequently, although RMT addresses relationship duration, it does not sufficiently encompass the reciprocal exchange and customization processes that are vital to this research.

Contrasting Theory 2: Resource-Based View (RBV)

The Resource-Based View (RBV) posits that firms can secure a sustainable competitive advantage by cultivating and leveraging internal resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) (Mailani et al., 2024). This framework is widely utilized to elucidate why certain firms outperform others through superior capabilities, proprietary assets, or specialized knowledge (Komakech et al., 2025; Mailani et al., 2024; Sipos et al., 2025). RBV highlights both tangible and intangible strengths, including brand reputation, intellectual property, and unique human capital, as fundamental sources of marketplace differentiation (Mailani et al., 2024; Sipos et al., 2025). In strategic management, RBV serves as a tool for evaluating how organizations allocate resources to drive sustained long-term performance (Komakech et al., 2025).

While RBV effectively explains the contribution of internal capabilities to firm success, it tends to overlook the significance of external interactions, particularly in service-oriented sectors where value is co-created with clients. For instance, small cleaning enterprises may lack conventional VRIN attributes yet remain competitive by emphasizing service flexibility, personalization, and active client engagement, each of which is intrinsically linked to relational dynamics (Komakech et al., 2025). Because RBV does not sufficiently address the impact of customer collaboration on value creation, its usefulness within this context is limited. Conversely, the SDL framework encompasses both internal competencies and external engagement, offering a more holistic perspective for analyzing how small service providers secure contracts and build trust with key decision-makers (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2022; Ranjan & Read, 2021; Vargo & Lusch, 2021).

Contrasting Theory 3: Diffusion of Innovations Theory

Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) theory, developed by Rogers (2003), described how technological, behavioral, or conceptual innovations spread within social systems over time (Asare & Prempeh, 2023). DOI classifies adopters by their readiness to accept innovations, including innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Jensen et al., 2020). The theory examines attributes of innovations such as relative advantage, compatibility, and complexity, and how these factors influence adoption rates and reach. DOI is frequently applied in studies assessing the introduction and uptake of new technologies or services within markets.

However, DOI mainly focuses on the characteristics of innovations and their dissemination patterns, rather than the interactions between providers and clients during service delivery. The application of this theory typically employs a one-way dissemination framework, overlooking how collaboration with customers can shape, customize, or enhance service innovation. Alternatively, SDL considers innovation and service delivery as co-created processes involving feedback, trust-building, and interaction (Vargo et al., 2020). For research examining strategies involving real-time client engagement rather than passive adoption, SDL provides a closer fit with these objectives. DOI does not specifically consider the relational components involved in contract acquisition strategies used by small cleaning businesses.

Themes Found in the Literature

The literature on small business engagement strategies identifies several themes relevant to the challenges encountered by small cleaning service firms when attempting to secure contracts. These themes include networking strategies, strategic partnerships, technology and automation, service differentiation, and trust-building. Collectively, these areas are frequently cited as methods by which service-based businesses enhance their positioning, credibility, and the development of sustainable client relationships beyond social media platforms (Bryson et al., 2021; Garcia & Moraga, 2020). Each theme describes a distinct engagement mechanism that aligns with the SDL approach, which emphasizes co-creation, customization, and collaboration between businesses and clients.

These themes are particularly relevant to small cleaning service providers, given the competitive and low-margin nature of the industry, where factors such as trust,

service quality, and flexibility can significantly impact long-term outcomes. Research indicates that passive marketing approaches, such as relying solely on social media, are typically insufficient for securing commercial contracts, particularly in contexts that require personal relationships and credibility (Turner & Endres, 2021; Zhang & Li, 2022). Studies suggest that firms employing interactive, relational, and technology-supported strategies tend to establish repeat clients and access decision-makers more effectively (Turner & Endres, 2021; Zhang & Li, 2022). The following subsections provide further analysis of each theme, exploring how small cleaning service businesses can generate value and differentiate themselves within contract-driven markets.

Networking Strategies for Contract Acquisition

Effective networking remains a cornerstone strategy for small service-oriented businesses seeking to enhance their visibility and credibility. Research indicates that engagement in local business organizations, industry associations, and community events significantly increases access to decision-makers requiring contract-based services (Nguyen et al., 2022). Beyond increasing visibility, networking facilitates the development of familiarity, trust, and rapport with prospective clients. These are critical factors in sectors such as commercial cleaning, where operations are conducted in sensitive or high-trust settings. Beuren et al. (2020) underscored that informal relationship-building often precedes formal contractual discussions and substantially influences a prospect's willingness to engage.

For small cleaning businesses operating with limited marketing resources, networking offers an efficient and cost-effective alternative to traditional advertising.

Networking empowers leaders and leaders to make lasting connections through direct interactions and personalized communication. Such exchanges reinforce SDL's focus on value co-creation by enabling cleaning service business leaders to listen, adapt, and respond to client needs in real-time (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). Rather than relying solely on curated social media content, in-person networking fosters a service-driven mindset rooted in responsiveness and authenticity.

The literature further notes that business-to-business networking can unlock opportunities with larger institutional clients that may otherwise remain inaccessible to smaller providers. Engagements such as membership in chambers of commerce or participation in vendor expos provide small firms with direct exposure to procurement professionals and key decision-makers seeking adaptable, reliable partners (Turner & Endres, 2021). These forums enable service providers to articulate their unique value propositions and tailor their offerings to address the specific challenges faced by clients. Garcia and Moraga (2020) highlighted the efficacy of these interpersonal channels for smaller firms working to bridge credibility gaps in competition with larger entities.

Consistent with the principles of SDL, networking is positioned not merely as a promotional tool but as a means of fostering relational engagement that generates mutual value. Small businesses that invest regularly in networking activities can establish themselves as trusted contributors within their communities, transcending the role of vendor to become collaborative partners. By maintaining an active presence in local or industry networks, cleaning service providers can gather client insights, refine service delivery models, and collaboratively develop tailored solutions. As such, networking

emerges as a strategic initiative that yields significant long-term benefits in client retention and contract acquisition, far surpassing its role as a simple marketing device.

Strategic Partnerships in Business Growth

Strategic partnerships are a notable engagement strategy for small cleaning service businesses seeking to enhance credibility and expand their client base. Research indicates that collaborating with complementary businesses, such as property management firms, real estate agencies, or suppliers of eco-friendly products, may help these companies access new markets and build trust through association (Chen & Chen, 2020). These partnerships enable small firms to leverage their partners' reputations and market presence, facilitating entry into more competitive sectors where independent efforts may be insufficient. Snihur and Wiklund (2019) founded that collaborative business models are associated with accelerated growth and stronger positioning within competitive service industries.

For small cleaning firms with limited resources, partnerships can also offer opportunities for sharing resources and achieving operational efficiencies. Collaboration may lead to referrals, bundled services, or packaged solutions that are better suited to larger clients. These cooperative strategies align with the SDL perspective on resource integration and co-creation, where various providers jointly contribute to client value (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). Partnerships encompass more than just transactional exchanges; they represent an interconnected network focused on value generation that relies on trust, mutual benefit, and knowledge-sharing.

Evidence from the literature suggests that effective alliances require strategic alignment and transparent communication. Bryson et al. (2021) reported that successful partnerships in service industries depend on cultural compatibility and operational clarity. When smaller firms collaborate with organizations with similar customer service approaches, their combined efforts are likely to be perceived as consistent and reliable. Conversely, misaligned partnerships may pose reputational risks if clients experience inconsistencies among service providers.

Strategic partnerships offer a potential path toward long-term sustainability and scalability without necessitating substantial investment in marketing or infrastructure. Expanding service options through collaboration can allow small cleaning firms to reach clients who prefer integrated service offerings. Such arrangements may also promote learning and innovation as businesses share the best practices. In line with SDL, these partnerships facilitate co-creation across organizational boundaries and reinforce approaches that prioritize flexibility, client needs, and trust.

Technology and Automation in Service Delivery

Technology and automation are increasingly prevalent in small service firms, particularly in client engagement and operational efficiency. Studies indicate that tools such as customer relationship management (CRM) systems, appointment scheduling software, digital invoicing, and feedback platforms can streamline firm-client interactions and positively impact the quality of service delivery (Pillai et al., 2021). These tools contribute to reducing errors, improving communication, and supporting client

customization of services, for example, by specifying cleaning frequency or particular requests.

From the perspective of SDL, technology is viewed as an enabler of value co-creation rather than solely an operational function. Ranjan and Read (2021) reported that businesses utilizing digital tools for client feedback demonstrate characteristics such as responsiveness and adaptability, which are often considered essential for establishing long-term trust with clients. Automation is also noted to facilitate reduced service friction through timely updates, transparent service processes, and accessible communication channels, which may contribute to perceptions of professionalism among small firms.

Nevertheless, reluctance to adopt technology persists among some small cleaning service providers, typically due to concerns about costs, complexity, or perceived lack of necessity. Research suggests that even basic technological solutions, such as online booking or automated reminders, may positively influence client satisfaction and contract retention rates (Wang & Huang, 2023). As digital interaction becomes more common, non-adoption may, for some clients, be interpreted as a sign of limited professionalism or commercial readiness. Pillai et al. (2021) noted that small businesses adopting scalable technologies may enhance customer perceptions and operational resilience.

Digital tool integration is aligned with SDL's emphasis on operational resources, including knowledge and adaptability (Marques et al., 2020). Such tools provide service providers with information regarding client needs and preferences, facilitating more tailored service delivery (Marques et al., 2020). They enable documentation of preferences, monitoring of quality metrics, and more effective responses to shifting client

expectations. When implemented strategically, these systems can establish feedback mechanisms that support ongoing service optimization and strengthen business-client relationships.

Service Differentiation and Customization

Service differentiation is broadly acknowledged as an effective strategy for achieving competitive advantage in saturated service markets. A case study found that small cleaning businesses using tailored checklists, time guarantees, and transparent performance updates increased contract wins and client retention (Kumar & Singh, 2021). The existing literature demonstrates that offering unique or specialized services, such as eco-friendly cleaning solutions, hospital-grade sanitation, or after-hours scheduling, enables small enterprises to distinguish themselves from competitors (Garcia & Moraga, 2020). Such tailored offerings foster client perceptions of attentiveness to individual needs, as opposed to generic, standardized services. Bessant and Tidd (2020) further asserted that innovation in service delivery, beyond merely the content of services, constitutes a significant source of market distinction.

From SDL's perspective, differentiation is intrinsically linked to the co-creation of value. Facilitating clients' ability to select or customize services according to their preferences empowers them to actively shape their service experience (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). This collaborative methodology enhances client satisfaction and provides valuable insights to inform ongoing innovation. Edvardsson et al. (2020) observed that firms that engage in service customization are typically perceived as more responsive, thereby establishing the trust necessary to secure repeat business.

Additionally, differentiation enhances the probability of securing contracts with clients in specialized sectors, such as educational institutions, healthcare facilities, or organizations with a strong environmental focus. These clients often present unique compliance requirements or specific cultural expectations that conventional providers may not address. Small businesses well positioned to meet these specialized demands are better equipped to win contracts and justify premium pricing. Turner and Endres (2021) highlighted that clients increasingly prefer providers who can demonstrate adaptability and alignment with organizational values.

Ultimately, differentiation enables small firms to respond more effectively to emerging market trends or shifting client needs. In times of disruption, such as during public health emergencies, organizations offering niche or adaptive services are better positioned to sustain operations and fulfill evolving expectations. Helms and Adams (2020) stated that strategic agility, along with planning and innovation, is associated with the survival and growth of firms in the cleaning services industry. Differentiation aligned with SDL fosters a feedback-driven service model in which continuous innovation and customer satisfaction reinforce each other, thereby strengthening the firm's capacity for growth and sustained competitiveness.

Trust and Relationship Building

Trust and relationship building are frequently discussed in the literature on client engagement and contract retention. In service-based industries, particularly those that require access to commercial or private spaces, trust is considered a vital component of the client-provider relationship (Bryson et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021). Research indicates

that small cleaning businesses emphasizing consistency, transparency, and responsiveness may be more likely to retain clients and encourage repeat business. SDL proposes that trust develops through ongoing collaboration and shared expectations, rather than solely through reliable transactions (Vargo & Lusch, 2021).

Face-to-face communication, regular follow-up, and personalized interactions are commonly identified as approaches for building client trust. Smaller firms can utilize their flexibility to cultivate closer connections compared to larger organizations, which might depend more on account managers or digital platforms (Bryson et al., 2021). These relationships can help businesses understand client concerns, provide proactive responses, and demonstrate a focus on ongoing partnerships (Turner & Endres, 2021).

Research also suggests that trust is supported when service providers communicate openly about limitations, timelines, and service standards (Beuren et al., 2020). Transparency can reduce ambiguity and foster mutual respect and reliability. Furthermore, trust may be reinforced by actively requesting feedback and adopting visible improvements, in line with SDL's perspective on co-creation and iterative development (Ranjan & Read, 2021).

Long-term client relationships are noted for providing stability amid competition and market changes (Rather, 2021). Firms with strong relational networks appear less prone to client loss during pricing adjustments or competitive challenges (Bryson et al., 2021). Studies on relationship marketing theory suggest that sustained trust and emotional connection can have a greater influence than short-term incentives in business-to-business service contracts (Rebiazina et al., 2024). As a result, trust-building is

presented as both a customer service approach and a business development consideration for small cleaning firms.

Table 1 summarized five key themes identified in the literature on effective business development strategies for small cleaning service companies: networking methods, forming strategic partnerships, using technology and automation, offering unique services, and fostering trust and relationships. Each theme offered insight into how these businesses connect with decision-makers and win contracts outside of social media marketing. Collectively, the findings underscore the importance of interactive, trust-based, and value-driven strategies that align with the principles of service-dominant logic.

Table 1

Summary of Literature Key Themes

Theme	Key Findings	Supporting Sources
Networking Strategies	Improves visibility and trust, which are important for contract acquisition.	(Bryson et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022)
Strategic Partnerships	Enhances credibility, shares resources, and expands reach.	(Garcia & Moraga, 2020; Snihur & Wiklund, 2019)
Technology and Automation	Streamline operations and enhance communication and feedback with clients.	(Pillai et al., 2021; Ranjan & Read, 2021)
Service Differentiation	Contributes to brand value and improves client satisfaction	(Beuren et al., 2020; Vargo et al., 2020)
Trust and Relationship Building	Encourages loyalty and repeat business; essential to SDL	(Bryson et al., 2021; Edvardsson et al., 2020)

Gaps in the Literature

Although a growing body of research exists on small business marketing and client engagement is increasing, a significant research gap remains regarding how small cleaning service enterprises connect with decision-makers and secure contracts outside social media channels. Most current studies emphasize general digital marketing approaches or focus on internal resource efficiency, often overlooking the interpersonal and strategic dimensions crucial for acquiring service contracts (Garcia & Moraga, 2020; Zhang & Li, 2022). Furthermore, while recent literature highlights the significance of social media engagement, less emphasis has been placed on alternative approaches, such as direct networking, forming strategic partnerships, differentiating services, and fostering client trust, as primary methods for reaching commercial clients. This gap limits the availability of robust, evidence-based guidance for small cleaning firms operating within contract-based industries.

Another gap pertains to the limited application of the SDL framework in studies related to small, service-oriented businesses, particularly in sectors such as cleaning services, where trust, personalization, and long-term client relationships are crucial. While SDL has been widely adopted in contexts such as healthcare, retail, and large-scale service provision, few investigations examine its applicability to small cleaning companies or the processes by which these firms co-create value with their clients throughout service delivery (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). As a result, the literature offers limited insight into how small service providers might utilize SDL-inspired practices, such as collaborative client relationships, adaptable service models, or

strategic technology integration, to win and retain commercial contracts. This project seeks to fill this void by employing SDL as a conceptual framework to explore innovative and practical client engagement strategies that extend beyond conventional digital marketing.

Transition

This literature review analyses alternative engagement tactics adopted by small cleaning service enterprises to secure contracts beyond social media marketing. Key themes identified include networking, forming strategic alliances, integrating technology, differentiating services, and fostering trust, all of which are fundamental to business growth efforts. These approaches align with SDL by emphasizing value co-creation, collaborative client relationships, and service delivery centered on engagement. The review highlights notable research gaps, including a scarcity of SDL-focused investigations that specifically address small cleaning businesses and a lack of comprehensive strategies for reaching decision-makers through non-digital avenues.

Section 3 outlines the qualitative methodological framework employed to investigate how leaders of small cleaning service firms employ diverse strategies to establish trust, promote engagement, and secure contracts. This segment provides an account of the project's design, participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis procedures, as well as ethical protocols, all contextualized within the SDL paradigm and executed through a pragmatic inquiry methodology.

Section 3: Research Project Methodology

In this section, I outline the research methodology I selected to examine innovative strategies employed by leaders of small cleaning service businesses to secure contracts beyond the scope of social media marketing. I implemented a qualitative, pragmatic inquiry design to investigate this multifaceted phenomenon through the authentic experiences of industry practitioners. I collected comprehensive, context-rich data that captured decision-making processes, engagement practices, and operational challenges. I anchored the project in the SDL framework, which emphasizes value co-creation, customization, and relationship-building as integral elements of service delivery and client engagement (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). In the subsequent subsections, I address the project's ethical considerations, my role as the researcher, participant selection criteria, data collection methods, data analysis strategy, and measures to ensure reliability and validity.

Project Ethics

In this qualitative project, I conducted all semistructured interviews, organized the data, and interpreted the findings. I established rapport with participants by asking open-ended interview questions and fostering an environment that encouraged open, bias-free sharing. I did not have existing personal or professional relationships with any participants or their businesses. I maintained neutrality throughout the project to ensure objectivity and prevent personal bias during data collection and interpretation (Chew-Graham, 2025).

I followed the ethical principles outlined in *The Belmont Report*, which emphasizes respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, and rigorous ethical standards were upheld during all research procedures (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 1979). Before data collection, I obtained informed consent from each participant, including a clear explanation of the project's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality protections, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants understood their right to withdraw at any time without penalty or explanation. If withdrawal occurred, I excluded the data from the analysis provided and destroyed all related materials. These practices reflect current ethical standards for protecting human subjects in qualitative research (Makateng & Mokala, 2025).

I did not provide incentives to participants; instead, their involvement contributed to the broader advancement of knowledge within the small cleaning service sector. To protect the participants, I assigned each a unique code (e.g., P1, P2, P3), and I omitted all names, business affiliations, and other identifying information from the final documents. I stored digital recordings, transcripts, and field notes on an encrypted USB drive in a locked cabinet at the home office, with data access restricted solely to me. I will keep all research materials for five years after completing the project, in accordance with Walden University policy, and then permanently delete them using certified data-wiping software. Please note that this project began only after IRB approval at Walden. The IRB approval number for this project is 08-11-25-1217958.

Nature of The Study

I selected a qualitative methodology to explore the strategies that small cleaning service business leaders use to engage decision-makers beyond social media. A pragmatic stance further supports this design by emphasizing adaptable, solution-oriented inquiry that produces actionable insights for practitioners (Elgeddawy & Abouraia, 2024). Using this approach, I gathered rich, narrative data through open-ended interviews. Qualitative research allows me to gain an in-depth understanding of individual or group experiences and the meanings they attribute to real-world phenomena (Chew-Graham, 2025).

In contrast, quantitative methodology, based on numerical data and hypothesis testing, did not align with this project because I am not measuring variables or conducting statistical analysis (Sale & Carlin, 2025). A mixed-methods approach, which combines qualitative and quantitative techniques to address research questions from multiple perspectives, was not appropriate for this project because the study did not require integrating both data types (Makateng & Mokala, 2025). Mixed methods can combine different types of evidence and potentially enhance the quality of inference (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004); however, quantitative integration was not necessary for addressing the research question in this project. Therefore, the qualitative method aligned best with the project's exploratory and context-sensitive objectives.

I considered three qualitative research designs relevant for this project: mini-ethnography and narrative. Mini-ethnography involves cultural immersion and extended observation, which are not part of this project (Avram, 2025). Narrative design is centered on collecting and interpreting individuals' life stories to derive meaning from

personal experiences (Dharamsi et al., 2021). While this approach provides valuable insights, it was deemed less suitable because the research objective involves identifying patterns across multiple business practices, rather than constructing detailed, chronological accounts of individual cases. Instead, I chose a pragmatic inquiry design, which investigates contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are unclear (Nowell et al., 2017). Using this design, I strengthen the findings by comparing diverse participant experiences across different geographic regions. Using this approach, I enhance the robustness of the findings by enabling comparisons across diverse participant experiences.

Population and Sampling

In this project, I focus on small business leaders in the cleaning services industry who have secured contracts through strategies beyond traditional social media marketing. Participants were recruited from the United States to reflect changes in population growth, business activity, and economic situations, giving context for studying engagement tactics employed by small cleaning service organizations (Alsaawi et al., 2021). By using a purposive sampling approach, I identified approximately 10 to 15 participants meeting the project's inclusion criteria: (a) holding a leadership or ownership position in a small cleaning business, (b) having secured contracts using approaches other than social media, and (c) being willing to participate in a semistructured interview. This criterion-based selection method aligned with the qualitative research design, facilitating a thorough examination of the research topic.

To facilitate recruitment, I used both traditional and digital outreach platforms, including YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook Groups, and industry-specific online communities such as ProClean Forum, National Clean Talking, CleanTalk, Houzz, and Mumsnet. Using this multi-channel strategy, I accessed a diverse participant pool and reflected current trends in professional networking within the service industry. Engaging with online platforms where cleaning business professionals exchanged ideas enabled me to identify participants with relevant experience and knowledge. Using purposive sampling through these platforms, I aligned participant selection with the project's objective to explore how small business leaders innovated beyond social media marketing. Using this method, I increased the likelihood of recruiting participants with in-depth contextual insights, aligning with the qualitative project's focus on meaning-making and context (Makateng & Mokala, 2025). Recruiting from various geographic regions and industry-specific online communities was intended to enhance the credibility of the data and ensure that the findings reflected a range of engagement practices.

Data Collection Activities

I served as the primary data collection instrument, conducting semistructured interviews with small business leaders in the cleaning services sector who had secured contracts through methods that did not rely exclusively on social media. Semistructured interviews are particularly well-suited for qualitative research, as they result in consistency across sessions while including flexibility to explore emerging themes in greater depth (Alsaawi et al., 2021). Using this methodology, I aligned the project with its exploratory aims and used open-ended experience-based questions designed to uncover

participants' strategies, values, and challenges (Chew-Graham, 2025; Faulkner & Faulkner, 2024). The interview environment was intentionally conversational and adaptable, fostering participant comfort and encouraging candid sharing of lived experiences.

I followed a structured interview protocol to ensure alignment with both the research objectives and the conceptual framework of SDL, which highlights value co-creation, customization, and relationship development between service providers and clients (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). The protocol consisted of core questions that addressed key strategies, including networking, trust-building, technology adoption, strategic partnerships, and service differentiation, each grounded in SDL theory and relevant literature. Before commencing the full interview phase, I underwent pilot testing with an individual outside the sample population to enhance question clarity, refine the interview flow, and ensure alignment with the research objectives (Sale & Carlin, 2025).

I collected data in sequential stages: (a) recruitment and eligibility screening; (b) obtaining informed consent; (c) scheduling and conducting interviews using secure video conferencing platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet; (d) audio recording interviews with participant approval; (e) transcription of the recorded sessions; and (f) member checking, whereby participants reviewed their transcripts for accuracy. This rigorous approach enhanced transparency and ensured the credibility and dependability of findings (Nowell et al., 2017). All interview questions in Appendix A were designed to facilitate open discussion among leaders of small cleaning businesses about engagement strategies.

These carefully structured procedures upheld robust qualitative methodology and maintained the highest ethical standards for participant involvement.

Data Analysis Method

I employed thematic analysis to analyze data from semistructured interviews conducted with small business leaders in the cleaning industry. I used the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2024). I identified recurring themes and patterns to examine how participants engaged decision-makers and secured contracts outside social media marketing. The thematic analysis included (a) data familiarization, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing these themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing a final report. This approach provided a systematic and transparent method for interpreting qualitative data.

The first step, familiarization, involved thoroughly reviewing interview transcripts, field notes, and participant responses to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the data. I conducted repeated readings of the transcripts and took reflective notes to recognize key ideas, trends, and tones. In the second phase, I established initial codes to highlight the data's meaningful attributes. Following Nowell et al. (2017), this phase helped me organize the material and identify phrases or responses relevant to the research questions. I used Atlas qualitative data analysis software to systematically categorize and code participant responses (Khan et al., 2024). Codes addressed topics such as value co-creation, networking, service differentiation, and trust-building, aligning with the SDL framework.

During the third and fourth phases, theme identification and review, I organized initial codes into broader categories that indicated patterns within the data. I grouped similar codes under overarching themes such as client engagement, relational trust, or contract acquisition methods. I refined the themes and cross-referenced them with the original data to ensure accuracy and relevance (Braun & Clarke, 2024). I also compared these themes with existing literature to support triangulation and consistency with previous research and theoretical perspectives (Alsaawi et al., 2021; Borg, 2024).

In the fifth stage, I defined and named each theme to clarify its relation to strategies used by small cleaning businesses. I included participant quotations to support and exemplify each theme, maintaining transparency and grounding the findings in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2024). In the final stage, I compiled the report and synthesized the findings into an organized account that aligned with the project's objectives and the SDL framework (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). These results illustrate how participants' approaches can be implemented in practice to inform contract acquisition and business practices.

The six-step process is an established method for qualitative analysis, supporting the reliability and clarity of the project. By incorporating reflexive analysis, reference to the SDL framework, and qualitative data analysis tools, I aimed to produce findings that were both methodologically rigorous and practically useful. These steps ensured the credibility, dependability, and confirmability associated with robust qualitative research (Borg, 2024). Although recent studies indicate that human AI collaboration can support coding workflows in thematic analysis (Yan et al., 2023), I used researcher-led coding and theme development to maintain reflexivity and contextual sensitivity.

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

I systematically managed all research data, including audio recordings, verbatim transcripts, reflective field notes, and member-checking feedback, using a secure, structured digital filing system. I assigned each participant a unique pseudonym (e.g., P1, P2) to uphold confidentiality. I organized files into categorized folders by participant identification, interview date, and processing stage (such as “transcribed,” “member checked,” or “coded”), ensuring robust audit trail management and efficient retrieval.

To maintain transparency and document the research process, I recorded all procedures undertaken during data collection and analysis in a comprehensive research log. This log detailed interview scheduling, participant correspondence, transcription progress, and coding decisions. I also maintained a reflexive journal to capture emerging analytical insights, patterns, and any personal biases or assumptions I identified during the interpretation process. By adhering to these documentation practices, I enhanced the dependability and confirmability of the project’s findings (Borg, 2024; Nowell et al., 2017).

I used reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke’s (2024) six-phase framework, to guide the data analysis. This methodology was particularly appropriate for pragmatic qualitative inquiry due to its adaptability and emphasis on meaning-making in real-world contexts. The six phases, familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production, constituted a rigorous yet flexible protocol for qualitative data analysis (Ranjan & Read, 2021; Vargo & Lusch,

2021). I meticulously documented each phase to ensure analytic transparency and coherence.

I used Atlas software to facilitate the entire analysis, providing tools for organizing, coding, and visualizing qualitative data. The software supported the generation of reports, matrices, and thematic queries that elucidated significant patterns within participant responses. Additionally, Atlas enabled code mapping and cross-participant comparisons, supporting a nuanced interpretation of strategies across diverse contexts (Khan et al., 2024).

Themes were analyzed through the lens of the SDL framework, which highlights value co-creation, resource integration, and relational engagement (Ranjan & Read, 2021; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). Data triangulation involved comparing participant responses with existing literature on strategic engagement, innovation, and relationship marketing, thus strengthening analytical rigor and grounding findings in both experiential and scholarly evidence (Akaka & Vargo, 2014; Albérico & Casaca, 2023; Bryson et al., 2021). I securely stored all raw and processed data, including recordings, coded transcripts, and analytic memos, on a password-protected USB drive housed in a locked cabinet accessible exclusively to me as the principal investigator, in strict accordance with Walden University's ethical research standards. After a 5-year retention period, I will permanently destroy all data using digital wiping software to ensure privacy, confidentiality, and data protection.

Reliability and Validity

To support methodological standards in this qualitative project, I implemented procedures to address common quality criteria in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and data saturation. These standards are comparable to reliability and validity concepts used in quantitative research and serve to establish rigor within qualitative inquiry (Nowell et al., 2017). By applying these principles, I provided evidence that the findings were adequately supported and relevant for applied contexts.

Credibility relates to the accuracy of findings from the participants' perspective. To address credibility, I conducted member checking by inviting participants to review summaries of their interview responses to verify the accuracy of interpretation and coding. This process validated the data and engaged participants. I also conducted peer debriefing through discussions with faculty advisors or academic colleagues to assess researcher bias and assumptions during analysis.

I used triangulation to reinforce credibility by comparing themes across participant responses and integrating them with existing literature on relationship marketing, customer engagement, and innovation ecosystems (Akaka & Vargo, 2014; Albérico & Casaca, 2023; van der Valk et al., 2020). This approach was intended to ensure that I identified patterns across diverse sources rather than relying on a single viewpoint. Triangulation contributed to the reliable thematic development by referencing established frameworks and real-world cases (Borg, 2024; Braun & Clarke, 2024; Nowell et al., 2017).

For transferability, I included detailed descriptions of the research context, such as participant business models, market characteristics, and situational factors. This level of description enabled others to determine the extent to which the findings might apply to other settings, including service-based small businesses in competitive contract environments (Nowell et al., 2017). I addressed dependability by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail that included interview guides, consent forms, analytical notes, Atlas coding records, and documentation of key procedural decisions. I also used a reflective journal to track analytical decisions and interpretations throughout the project (Borg, 2024). This record-keeping allowed for replication or review of research processes.

I managed confirmability by keeping a research log and a reflexive journal that detailed code and theme development, the rationale for analytic decisions, and correspondence between participant input and results. These records helped differentiate my interpretation from participant contributions (Nowell et al., 2017). By using Atlas software, I provided transparent coding and data management, including version control and analytic memos (Khan et al., 2024). When I no longer identified new conceptual categories, I concluded that saturation had been reached (Braun & Clarke, 2024). I considered data saturation achieved when no new codes, concepts, or themes emerged from ongoing interviews. I monitored saturation throughout data collection and analysis by assessing whether additional interviews yielded new insights or repeated identified patterns.

By consistently applying the five outlined criteria, the project was designed to adhere to established practices for ensuring trustworthiness and rigor in qualitative research. Attention to credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and data saturation was intended to guide the project's assessment of small business engagement strategies and service-based contract acquisition. These measures enhanced the project's academic value and provided practical guidance for leaders of cleaning service businesses in competitive, service-based environments.

Transition and Summary

This section outlines the research methodology I implemented to investigate innovative strategies adopted by small cleaning service business leaders to engage decision-makers and secure contracts beyond traditional social media marketing. I chose a qualitative approach, rooted in a pragmatic inquiry design, to capture the nuanced and contextual experiences of service-based entrepreneurs. In this discussion, I addressed ethical considerations, my role as the researcher, participant recruitment and sampling criteria, as well as the justification for employing semistructured interviews to explore participants' lived experiences.

I structured data collection activities to achieve depth, flexibility, and reliability through a systematic interview protocol, participant member checking, and reflective journaling practices. I organized and analyzed data using Braun and Clarke's (2024) six-phase thematic analysis framework, facilitated by Atlas software, digital labeling systems, and a comprehensive audit trail. I maintained trustworthiness through measures

that enhanced credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, thereby upholding rigorous ethical and methodological standards.

In Section 4, I will present the data analysis results and provide an in-depth discussion of emerging themes, supported by direct quotations from participants. I will interpret these findings using the SDL framework and organize them to deliver practical, evidence-based guidance for small cleaning service businesses. In this discussion, I will emphasize how innovative engagement techniques can broaden contract acquisition opportunities beyond dependence on conventional social media marketing.

Section 4: Findings and Conclusions

Presentation of Findings

In the qualitative pragmatic inquiry, I explored innovative approaches that small cleaning service business leaders have implemented to engage decision-makers and obtain cleaning contracts without depending on social media. The central research question for this project was: What effective and innovative strategies can small cleaning service business leaders use to engage decision-makers and secure contracts through methods other than social media marketing? I gathered data from five small cleaning service business leaders through semistructured interviews conducted over Zoom. I coded and analyzed the interview transcripts were coded and analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2024) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis process.

I analyzed the interview data identified five main themes representing recurring strategic actions described by participants. These themes are (a) client engagement through personal connection and strategic networking, (b) communication excellence and active listening, (c) collaborative value creation, (d) business initiative and proactive outreach, and (e) professionalism and service quality. Each theme was illustrated by several direct quotes from participant interviews, revealing common experiences and practices across different cases. The repetition of these patterns underscored participants' ongoing focus on cultivating relationships, intentional communication, and active outreach, rather than depending on digital or social media marketing methods.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that participants depended on relationship-focused, human-centered methods to engage decision-makers and win contracts. Participants highlighted the importance of building trust, maintaining visibility, being responsive, and demonstrating professionalism as core components of their business growth efforts. These themes illustrated how participants created value, set their services apart, and fostered long-term client relationships in the cleaning services industry. Table 1 shows the distribution of participant input across the five main themes recognized in this project.

Table 2 includes the sample codes that contributed to the development of each primary theme. This table shows which participants contributed to each theme and displays how many individuals were connected to each category. Such a summary brings to light participant involvement trends and demonstrates the extent to which each theme appeared throughout the dataset.

Table 2

Participant Coverage Across Dominant Themes

Theme	Participants	Number of Participants
Client Engagement Through Personal Connection	P1, P2, P5	3
Strategic Networking as a Growth Catalyst	P1, P3, P4	3
Communication Excellence and Active Listening	P2, P3, P5	3
Collaborative Value Creation	P1, P4, P5	3
Business Initiative and Proactive Outreach	P1, P3, P5	3

Table 3 presents the frequency of each theme that was referenced, illustrating the prevalence of these topics within the coded data. The table illustrates sample coded segments that contributed to the identification and analysis of themes. These codes highlight the structured approach used to categorize participant responses throughout the thematic analysis.

Table 3

Themes and Sample Codes

Theme	Sample Codes
Client Engagement Through Personal Connection	Door-to-door outreach; Property walk-throughs; Face-to-face meetings
Strategic Networking as a Growth Catalyst	Chamber membership; Referral follow-up; Relationship tracking
Communication Excellence and Active Listening	Active listening; Feedback checklists; Nonverbal cues
Collaborative Value Creation	Joint bidding; Strategic partnerships; Bundled services
Business Initiative and Proactive Outreach	Cold outreach; Market scanning; Sample services

Tables 2 and 3 together summarize the key themes revealed in this project, along with the coded data that contributed to their identification. These tables highlight the extent of participant involvement and present sample codes, clarifying how each core theme emerged from the analysis. The next sections offer an in-depth analysis of each theme, drawing on participant stories and connecting them to the guiding conceptual framework.

Table 4 summarizes the distribution of coded references across the five principal themes identified in the study. Each theme is substantiated by contributions from three participants, reflecting consistent involvement throughout the dataset. Theme 1, Client Engagement Through Personal Connection, recorded the highest number of coded references (40), with Strategic Networking as a Growth Catalyst (38) and Communication Excellence and Active Listening (37) following closely. Collaborative Value Creation was supported by 32 coded references, while Business Initiative and Proactive Outreach was noted 20 times. These frequencies highlight the relative significance of each theme within the coded interview data.

Table 4

Themes and Coded References

Main Themes	Participants	Coded References
Theme 1: Client Engagement Through Personal Connection	3	40
Theme 2: Strategic Networking as a Growth Catalyst	3	38
Theme 3: Communication Excellence and Active Listening	3	37
Theme 4: Collaborative Value Creation	3	32
Theme 5: Business Initiative and Proactive Outreach	3	20

The following sections include a detailed exploration of each theme, supported by participant narratives.

Theme 1 Client Engagement Through Personal Connection

Client engagement through personal connection emerged as the most significant theme throughout participant feedback. P1, P2, and P5 consistently noted that engaging with clients in person was more successful for winning contracts than approaches that relied on passive or digital communication. P1 described taking a highly active approach focused on being seen and maintaining frequent face-to-face meetings, sharing, “Most of our contracts are from old-fashioned door-to-door knocking... we go see 15 to 20 new prospects a day.” This method showed a clear intention to maintain a physical presence in client spaces, which helped build familiarity and trust over time. Rather than using promotional messages, P1 focused on regular visibility and presence as ways to gain credibility and connect with key decision makers.

P2 similarly highlighted the value of personal presence, but viewed engagement as more about forming relationships than simply increasing the number of contacts. P2 stated, “You have to show up in person. Email is okay, but shaking hands works better.” Unlike P1, who stressed frequent contact, P2 emphasized how in-person meetings serve as a powerful symbol of trust when first meeting clients. P5 expanded on this relational approach by focusing on hands-on experiences, explaining, “They see us and trust us more when we take the time to walk the property with them.” By conducting property walkthroughs, P5 demonstrated real-time attentiveness and responsiveness, which helped reinforce trust through direct action instead of only relying on spoken promises. Taken together, participants’ experiences showed that personal engagement was not just a way to reach out but served as a strategic basis for building strong business relationships.

Although participants differed in their methods, whether focusing on repeated contact, physical presence, or direct experiences, all agreed that personal connection was key to gaining credibility and access. These results matched service-dominant logic's focus on creating value through relationship-based interaction (Vargo & Lusch, 2021) and relationship-marketing research, which identified in-person engagement as an important trust-building element in service-oriented SMEs (Hsiao et al., 2022; Turner & Endres, 2021). Table 5 lists Theme 1 subthemes and shows which participants and coded references supported each one.

Table 5

Theme 1: Client Engagement Through Personal Connection

Subtheme	Participants	Coded References
Face-to-Face Outreach	P1, P2	15
Property Walkthroughs	P5	12
Trust Building Through Presence	P1, P2, P5	13

Subtheme 1.1: Face-to-Face Outreach

Face-to-face outreach emerged as a fundamental method by which participants began building relationships and establishing credibility with decision-makers. Instead of depending on digital communication or passive marketing, participants consistently prioritized being physically present during initial engagement. P1 highlighted the value of persistent, visible outreach, noting, "Most of our contracts are from old-fashioned door-to-door knocking... we go see 15 to 20 new prospects a day." This approach showcased a

purposeful, high-volume strategy where ongoing in-person interactions helped create familiarity and maintain visibility among potential clients.

On the other hand, P2 viewed face-to-face outreach as centered less on how often it occurred and more on the relational signals it sent. P2 remarked, “You have to show up in person. Email is okay, but shaking hands works better,” emphasizing that in-person meetings conveyed seriousness and reliability. While P1 described physical outreach as a means to maximize opportunities and exposure, P2 focused on the symbolic importance of presence in demonstrating commitment and professionalism. Both views highlighted the shortcomings of digital communication for building trust with decision-makers at the outset of a relationship.

Participants describe face-to-face outreach as more than just a sales technique; it acted as a gateway for establishing expectations, credibility, and mutual acknowledgment. Participants explained how meeting in person enabled them to answer questions immediately, observe client reactions, and adjust their communication in real-time capabilities not possible through email or online outreach alone. These insights were consistent with relationship-marketing literature, which emphasizes that direct interpersonal contact preceded the development of trust in service settings (Albérico & Casaca, 2023; Albers & Krafft, 2022).

From an SDL viewpoint, face-to-face outreach facilitated value co-creation by allowing service providers and potential clients to collaboratively shape expectations through direct interaction rather than one-way promotion (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). In this project, participants’ focus on physical presence demonstrated how relational actions, not

just promotional messages, serve as operant resources that start the value-creation process. As initial interactions progress into deeper engagement, face-to-face outreach frequently transitions into more collaborative efforts, such as on-site evaluations and joint discussions of service requirements, which are discussed in the next subtheme.

Subtheme 1.2: Property Walkthroughs

Property walkthroughs appeared as a unique method of engagement that took personal connection further by enabling collaborative, on-site evaluation. P5 pointed out that conducting site walkthroughs with prospective clients enhances their credibility and helps build trust more quickly, explaining, “They see us and trust us more when we take the time to walk the property with them.” P5 perspective indicates that trust was not merely a result of verbal promises; rather, P5 depicted trust as something that grew when decision-makers witnessed real-time attentiveness, responsiveness, and professionalism. P5 reported that walkthroughs give the chance to show an understanding of the client’s specific environment and to tailor their services to the actual needs of the site, which contrasts with generic service explanations that could be delivered from a distance or through standard messaging.

Participants reported that walkthroughs served as collaborative environments where participants and decision-makers jointly explored requirements, set priorities, and clarified expectations for service. This approach demonstrated an SDL-based focus on co-creating value through interaction within the context itself, rather than deciding all details before the engagement took place (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Vargo et al., 2020). From a practical perspective, walkthroughs enabled P5 to address needs as they arose,

adapt recommendations to what they found on site, and build trust by visibly demonstrating expertise. Earlier service research also noted that involving clients in the actual design and delivery of services could increase trust, better align perceived fit, and raise satisfaction levels, especially in small service firms where experience must indicate credibility (Beuren et al., 2020; Hsiao et al., 2022). As P5 described, walkthroughs form a link from the first contact to growing confidence in the relationship, laying the groundwork for trust that can be strengthened through continued presence and reliable actions.

Subtheme 1.3: Trust Building Through Presence

Consistent presence as a trust-building strategy appeared as a central theme throughout participant accounts, connecting outreach efforts with the development of stable relationships and enhanced credibility. P1's focus on frequent in-person outreach ("we go see 15 to 20 new prospects a day") participants demonstrates that trust was fostered through ongoing, visible engagement, showing reliability by maintaining regular contact rather than relying solely on promotional tactics. P2 reinforced the idea that interpersonal interactions and relational signals, such as "shaking hands works better," establish credibility in ways that digital communication could not match. P5 anchored trust in direct involvement during property walkthroughs, noting that clients "see us and trust us more" when time was dedicated to visiting the site together. Although each participant described presence uniquely, P1 through repeated engagement, P2 by relational expression, and P5 via hands-on experience, they all agreed that trust

developed when decision-makers could directly observe professionalism, attentiveness, and dedication.

Findings indicate that trust resulted from ongoing relational engagement rather than isolated encounters. Relationship marketing literature highlighted that trust and commitment within service environments were reinforced through continuous involvement, responsiveness, and repeated exchanges that gradually reduced uncertainty (Albérico & Casaca, 2023; Rebiazina et al., 2024). Using an SDL lens, presence acted as an operant resource by demonstrating relational competence, how participants utilized communication, attention, and professionalism to encourage ongoing value co-creation (Akaka & Vargo, 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). Participants' trust was reported both a product of engagement and a supporting factor for expanding relationships, helping participants maintain their credibility, improving access to decision-makers, and keeping opportunities open after initial contact had been made.

SDL Framework Connection

Building on the practices described in the Theme 1 subthemes, the findings align directly with service-dominant logic's emphasis on personalized service delivery and relationship-based value co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). These findings aligned with theme 1 directly with SDL's emphasis on personalized service delivery and relationship-based value co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). The personal connection strategies participants describe strategies such as understanding individual client needs, maintaining ongoing dialogue, and adapting services to specific contexts exemplified SDL's principle that Edvardsson et al. (2020) described as value that is generated through collaborative

interaction rather than standardized product delivery. By engaging clients through personal connection, participants leveraged operant resources, knowledge of client preferences, communication skills, and relational capabilities to create customized value that mass-market providers could not replicate. The emphasis on "personal connection" reflects SDL's actor-to-actor (A2A) orientation, which, as Vargo et al. (2020) stated, recognizes that all economic exchanges ultimately involve human relationships and context-specific value creation. The participants' client engagement approaches demonstrate SDL's principle that service providers did not deliver value but rather participated in value co-creation processes where clients play active roles in defining needs and evaluating outcomes. This collaborative approach contrasts sharply with traditional goods-dominant logic, where providers simply deliver standardized services, and clients passively receive them. Instead, participants described iterative, dialogic processes where client engagement shapes service delivery continuously.

Literature Connection

These findings aligned with Zhang and Li (2022), who found that personalized client engagement significantly outperformed mass-marketing approaches in B2B service contexts, particularly when providers demonstrated a genuine understanding of client-specific needs. Kumar and Singh (2021) similarly identified personal connection as a critical differentiator in competitive service markets, where decision-makers increasingly valued relationships over transactional interactions. The current findings extend this research by demonstrating how personal connections functioned specifically within the commercial cleaning industry and by identifying specific relationship-focused practices

through which small business leaders foster these connections within this sector. The emphasis on "personal connection" as a strategic advantage supports Turner and Endres' (2021) finding that relationship depth predicts contract retention more strongly than service price or scope. Ranjan and Read (2021) noted that effective client engagement required ongoing investment in understanding client contexts and adapting services accordingly, a principle that participants in the current project clearly understood and implemented. The findings also confirm Nasir et al.'s (2023) observation that small service firms that prioritize personal relationships over standardized service delivery achieve greater client satisfaction and business development success, particularly when competing against larger firms with greater resources but less flexibility.

Theme 2 Strategic Networking as a Growth Catalyst

Participants recognized strategic networking as a purposeful and growth-driven activity among participants P1, P3, and P4, who consistently portrayed networking as an intentional approach rather than mere casual interaction. P1 highlighted joining formal business groups as a way to gain direct access to key decision-makers, stating, "We joined the Chamber of Commerce just to connect with the right people in property management." This comment reflected a focused strategy centered on reaching individuals with authority and influence, rather than seeking broad exposure. Similarly, P3 valued organized networking environments but focused on developing relationships over time, sharing that "networking events helped us build solid relationships that turned into contracts." While both participants described involvement in formal forums, P1

viewed networking as a gateway to access, whereas P3 stressed the importance of relationship building and trust through ongoing contact.

P4 contributed a complementary but distinct viewpoint by presenting networking as a targeted word-of-mouth technique supported by systematic follow-up. Instead of focusing on event attendance, P4 explained, “It’s really word of mouth, but intentional. I follow up and track every conversation.” This perspective emphasized the operational side of networking, where maintaining relationships depended on structured processes rather than chance encounters. Collectively, participants’ narratives showed two connected facets of strategic networking: beginning connections through targeted professional venues and maintaining those relationships through disciplined follow-up and accountability. Participants used networking as an organized system that transformed relationship-building into tangible business results.

Overall, participants described strategic networking as a way to establish credibility, boost visibility, and turn relationship capital into contracts. Their focus on targeted engagement, systematic relationship management, and consistent follow-up matched research indicating that service-based SMEs achieved the most benefit from intentional network building, rather than broad or unplanned outreach (Albérico & Casaca, 2023; Albers & Krafft, 2022; Bryson et al., 2021). These approaches also mirrored relationship-marketing concepts that place trust, continuity, and reciprocity at the center of sustained value creation (Albérico & Casaca, 2023; Albers & Krafft, 2022). From a service-dominant logic perspective, participants utilized professional networks as service ecosystems where participants generated value through continual interaction and

resource integration, instead of simple transactional exchanges (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). As these networking relationships deepened and trust took hold, participants moved beyond one-on-one connections toward greater collaboration, setting the stage for partnership-oriented strategies addressed in the following subthemes. Table 6 summarizes the subthemes related to Theme 2 and identifies the participants and coded references that supported each subtheme.

Table 6

Theme 2: Strategic Networking as a Growth Catalyst

Subtheme	Participants	Coded References
Targeted Professional Associations	P1, P3	8
Intentional Relationship Follow-Up	P3, P4	7
Structured Word-of-Mouth Development	P1, P4	6

Subtheme 2.1: Targeted Professional Associations

Participants described that engaging selectively in professional associations was a purposeful tactic to reach decision-makers, rather than a routine networking practice. P1 specifically described association membership as a calculated move, stating, “We joined the Chamber of Commerce just to connect with the right people in property management.” This perspective reflected a focused strategy where the value of the network stemmed from direct access to influential individuals, not from the breadth or visibility of the group. P1 emphasized positioning the business within environments concentrated with authority and purchasing influence instead of pursuing widespread outreach.

Similarly, P3 underscored the significance of organized professional environments but placed greater emphasis on how relationships progressed rather than just on initial connection. P3 noted, “networking events helped us build solid relationships that turned into contracts,” highlighting that repeated involvement within these associations established trust and familiarity over time. Instead of informal or spontaneous encounters, both participants regarded professional associations as entry points for building credibility through consistent engagement. While P1 concentrated on the selection of networking spaces, P3 focused on the development of relationships within those environments, together representing distinct yet complementary aspects of targeted association participation.

These responses indicated that participants selected networking environments strategically to build trust and access decision-makers. From the SDL perspective, professional associations acted as service ecosystems where value was co-created through shared standards, ongoing interactions, and reciprocal expectations rather than simple transactions (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). In this project, targeted associations were depicted not as marketing venues, but as relational structures through which participants established themselves in decision-making circles and strengthened their professional credibility.

Subtheme 2.2: Intentional Relationship Follow-Up

Participants describe deliberate follow-up as a key factor that distinguished strategic networking from passive relationship development. P4 clearly described this, explaining, “It’s really word of mouth, but intentional. I follow up and track every

conversation.” This response reflected a structured and ongoing process in which networking extended beyond initial interactions. Whereas P1 and P3 focused on joining professional groups and attending events to access networks, P4 concentrated on managing post-event interactions as the means to nurture and convert relationships into tangible opportunities.

P3 also highlighted the importance of ongoing interaction, noting that contract wins came from relationships built over time rather than from first meetings alone. While P3 stressed the value of repeated participation in networking spaces, P4’s approach centered on organized follow-up routines: documenting discussions, staying in touch, and checking in on contacts to ensure that connections remained active. Together, these responses indicated that networking effectiveness depends less on the number of events attended and more on the maintenance of relationships, where consistent follow-up transformed initial contacts into lasting commitments.

These responses showed that participants reinforced trust and sustained long-term professional connections by regularly following up, communicating consistently, and referencing previous interactions. From the SDL point of view, follow-up served as an operant resource based on responsiveness, acquired knowledge, and flexible communication, allowing participants to adapt to clients’ changing needs (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). The accounts from participants indicated that value was created through continuous interaction rather than isolated meetings, supporting the idea that networking effectiveness is built over time, through iterative engagement rather than immediate outcomes.

Subtheme 2.3: Structured Word-of-Mouth Development

Participants describe word-of-mouth as a managed and intentional process rather than an incidental outcome of service delivery. P4's emphasis that referrals were "intentional" highlighted how recommendations were cultivated through deliberate communication and relationship tracking rather than left to chance. This response reflected a shift from viewing word-of-mouth as a spontaneous to understanding it as a structured outcome of sustained engagement.

P1 similarly described networking relationships as pathways to introductions within property management circles, indicating that referrals often followed from trusted relational positioning rather than direct solicitation. P3 reinforced this perspective by contrasting informal exposure with relational depth, explaining that repeated engagement allowed decision-makers to move from recognition to confidence and, ultimately, contract commitment. While P1 and P3 emphasized relational credibility developed through visibility and engagement, P4 emphasized systematization and intentionality, illustrating different but complementary approaches to structured word-of-mouth development.

These responses indicated that referrals developed when trust was supported by consistent interaction and perceived reliability. SDL further contextualized these practices by framing referrals as indicators of value co-creation, where satisfied actors became resource integrators who extended the service ecosystem on behalf of the provider (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Ranjan & Read, 2021). Within this project, structured word-of-mouth represented not passive reputation building but an intentional extension of

relational engagement, reinforcing participants' positioning as credible, dependable partners within their professional networks.

SDL Framework Connection

Expanding upon the strategic networking practices outlined in the Theme 2 subthemes, these findings illustrate SDL's focus on service ecosystems and value creation through networks (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). Theme 2 exemplified SDL's emphasis on service ecosystems and network-based value creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). Strategic networking functioned as a mechanism for integrating resources across organizational and social boundaries, enabling participants to access decision-makers, build reputational capital, and position themselves within broader business communities (Vargo et al., 2020). The networking strategies participants described joining chambers of commerce, attending industry events, volunteering in business associations, and maintaining a visible community presence demonstrated SDL's principle that value creation extended beyond dyadic firm-client relationships to encompass broader institutional and network contexts (Edvardsson et al., 2020). By participating strategically in business networks, participants contributed to and benefited from collective value creation within service ecosystems.

Networking served as both an operant resource (knowledge and skills in building relationships) and a mechanism for accessing additional operant resources (social capital, market knowledge, and referral relationships). This dual function aligned with SDL's recognition that resources gained value through integration and application within broader systems rather than through inherent properties (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). The

participants' emphasis on "strategic" networking, selecting appropriate networks, contributing actively rather than passively participating, and building authentic relationships over time, reflected a sophisticated understanding that networking success depended on genuine engagement rather than superficial contact collection. This approach resonated with SDL's principle that value co-creation required sustained, collaborative interaction among actors within service ecosystems (Ranjan & Read, 2021).

Literature Connection

These findings strongly aligned with Turner and Endres (2021), who found that active participation in business networks significantly accelerated contract acquisition for small service firms, particularly when participants engaged authentically rather than transactionally. Bryson et al. (2021) similarly identified strategic networking as a competitive advantage that offset resource limitations, enabling small businesses to access opportunities typically available only to larger firms with greater marketing budgets. These findings extended prior research by demonstrating the role of strategic networking practices within the cleaning industry, providing industry-specific insights into the processes through which small service businesses leverage network participation to secure contract opportunities. The emphasis on "strategic" networking, selecting appropriate networks based on client demographics, and actively engaging through committee service and event organization, provided operational detail that previous research often lacked. Garcia and Moraga (2020) noted that networking effectiveness depended on authenticity and contribution rather than mere attendance, a principle that participants in the current project clearly understood.

The observation that networking functioned as a "growth catalyst" supported recent scholarship on accelerated business development through social capital (Chen & Chen, 2020), where network relationships provided access to opportunities, information, and credibility that would otherwise require years to develop. Snihur and Wiklund (2019) found that entrepreneurs who approached networking strategically, identifying high-value networks, contributing meaningfully, and maintaining relationships systematically, achieved significantly greater growth than those who networked passively or opportunistically. The current findings confirmed this pattern while adding industry-specific insights about how networking facilitated contract acquisition in service businesses where trust and reputation strongly influenced purchasing decisions.

Theme 3 Communication Excellence and Active Listening

Participants describe communication excellence and attentive listening as essential practices for achieving successful client outcomes. P2, P3, and P5 consistently indicated that truly engaging with clients involved more than simple transactional exchanges. P2 describes listening as a deliberate strategy rather than politeness, stating, "Active listening is how we understand what they really want. Sometimes it's not just about price." This response indicated the importance of identifying underlying client preferences that were not always openly expressed. P5 added to this interpretive stance by focusing on nonverbal signals, stating, "I watch their body language when we talk. If they're unsure, I clarify right away." Collectively, these responses indicated that participants used communication as an adaptive and interpretive process, allowing participants to modify services in the moment, reflecting service-dominant logic's

prioritization of high-quality interactions as the basis for value creation (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2021).

Although P2 and P5 concentrated on relational and situational sensitivity, P3 approached communication excellence through systematic feedback mechanisms. P3 described deploying a checklist-driven method, explaining, “We use a checklist of feedback and share it with our team so we don’t miss anything.” This organized process differed from P2’s conversational approach and P5’s focus on immediate observation, yet all three methods focused on reducing gaps between client needs and service delivery.

The diversity in participant strategies indicated that communication excellence involved reliability, adaptability, and consistent follow-up, which supported trust-building within client relationships (Alsaawi et al., 2021). Participants viewed communication as an ongoing cycle of feedback that enabled tailored services, fostered stronger connections, and promoted longer-lasting contracts. As participants transformed communication into both interpersonal practices and structured systems, these results underscored communication as a core operant resource that facilitated ongoing value co-creation rather than being limited to single service transactions (Akaka & Vargo, 2014; Ranjan & Read, 2021). Table 7 summarizes the subthemes related to Theme 3 and identifies the participants and coded references that correspond to each subtheme.

Table 7*Theme 3: Communication Excellence and Active Listening*

Subtheme	Participants	Coded References
Active Listening to Uncover Client Priorities	P2, P5	14
Structured Feedback and Follow-Up Systems	P3	11
Nonverbal Communication and Emotional Awareness	P5	12

Subtheme 3.1: Active Listening to Unspoken Client Needs

Active listening was identified as a fundamental communication strategy that allowed participants to recognize not only clear client requests but also underlying concerns and unspoken expectations. P2 described listening as an analytical endeavor, saying, “Active listening is how we understand what they really want. Sometimes it’s not just about price.” This perspective indicated an understanding that client priorities could be complex and not completely disclosed during initial discussions. Instead of simply accepting what was said at face value, P2 explained that listening functioned as a diagnostic tool to reveal operational challenges, service sensitivities, and underlying choice factors that might otherwise be overlooked. In this way, communication served as a method for discovering value, not just exchanging information, aligning with SDL’s view that value emerged through collaborative sensemaking between service providers and clients (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2021).

P5 supported this interpretive perspective but placed greater emphasis on nonverbal observation as the main method for identifying unspoken needs. P5 shared, “I watch their body language when we talk. If they’re unsure, I clarify right away.” While

P2 concentrated on interpreting underlying priorities within the content of conversations, P5 focused on noticing hesitation and emotional cues as signs of possible misalignment. This distinction demonstrated that active listening took different forms: one approach involved exploring the meaning beneath expressed concerns, while the other prioritized detecting uncertainty through physical and emotional indicators. Regardless of these differences, both participants characterized listening as a responsive activity that required immediate adaptation rather than postponed action. Relationship-marketing research reinforced this interpretation, noting that perceived attentiveness built trust by showing commitment to understanding each client's unique context (Albérico & Casaca, 2023; Albers & Krafft, 2022). In this project, active listening functioned as a relational skill that enabled participants to proactively adjust services, rather than merely respond after the fact.

Subtheme 3.2: Structured Feedback and Communication Documentation

Unlike the interpretive approaches to listening, structured feedback mechanisms represented a deliberate and systematized method for managing communication. P3 described integrating client feedback directly into routine operations, noting, "We use a checklist of feedback and share it with our team so we don't miss anything." This strategy demonstrated a conscious move to formalize communication processes rather than depend on informal conversations or individual discretion. By recording feedback and circulating it among the staff, P3 made sure that client input consistently influenced service delivery across various employees and locations. This method minimized the

potential for miscommunication and bolstered team accountability, especially when multiple workers were involved in delivering services.

While P2 and P5 prioritized immediate interpretation and adaptability during interactions, P3 focused on maintaining structure and continuity after client engagements. This difference highlighted two distinct yet complementary communication approaches uncovered in the project: intuitive, real-time responsiveness versus organized, methodical incorporation of feedback into business practices. Through the lens of SDL, structured documentation served as an operant resource that facilitated knowledge exchange and supported ongoing value co-creation (Akaka & Vargo, 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). The relationship-marketing field likewise pointed out that official feedback frameworks enhanced trust by demonstrating reliability and consistent follow-up (Albérico & Casaca, 2023; Pillai et al., 2021). In this project, documentation elevated listening from being solely an individual ability to becoming an organizational norm, ensuring that client perspectives continued to shape service delivery past the initial point of contact.

Subtheme 3.3: Nonverbal Communication and Emotional Awareness

Participants describe nonverbal communication as an important component of communication effectiveness, especially highlighted by P5's focus on emotional sensitivity. P5 pointed out that clients did not consistently articulate their discomfort or uncertainty, saying, "If they're unsure, I clarify right away." This remark illustrated the need to read facial expressions, body posture, and engagement as signals of clients' comfort and confidence, in contrast to structured feedback systems, which took effect following service delivery. Attending to these cues enable participants to respond

immediately during client interactions, helping to resolve misunderstandings before they could lead to dissatisfaction.

This method differed from P3's approach of relying on documentation after the service was completed, while also aligning with P2's focus on identifying hidden preferences. Combined, these approaches showed that communication excellence happened at several points in time before, during, and after service engagement. Through the lens of SDL, being alert to emotional signals reinforced the idea that service exchanges were jointly shaped in the moment, rather than strictly following predetermined processes (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Ranjan & Read, 2021). Scholarship in relationship marketing also found that emotional awareness improved relationship strength by demonstrating empathy, professionalism, and contextual understanding (Alsaawi et al., 2021; Zhang & Li, 2022). In this project, nonverbal communication acted as a proactive trust-building tool, setting apart those who actively assessed client comfort from those who depended only on direct feedback.

SDL Framework Connection

Theme 3 reflected the SDL emphasis on dialogue and adaptive engagement as essential drivers for co-creating value (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). The communication strategies participants outlined, including focused listening, on-the-spot clarification, and systematic feedback routines, illustrated how value was generated through ongoing, communicative exchange rather than fixed service routines (Edvardsson et al., 2020). Participants describe communication as an ongoing process through which service expectations were clarified, modified, and reinforced over time. Active listening served

as an operant resource, allowing participants to interpret both spoken and unspoken client signals and adjust services accordingly, in line with SDL's view of service personalization as a key strategic advantage (Vargo & Lusch, 2021).

Instead of simply providing prearranged cleaning services, participants relied on communication to involve clients in defining service details that responded to current needs and changing expectations. This practice aligned with SDL's distinction between operand resources (standardized products) and operant resources (expertise, attentiveness, and communication skills) as sources of competitive edge (Ranjan & Read, 2021). The participants' focus on adaptability, clarification, and consistent follow-up showed that value creation in service environments relied on dialogical interaction and shared understanding, rather than one-sided service delivery, supporting SDL's actor-to-actor perspective (Vargo & Lusch, 2021).

Literature Connection

These findings aligned with the work of Ranjan and Read (2021) and Zhang and Li (2022), who reported that communication rooted in relationships surpassed transactional marketing in B2B service settings, especially when providers showed attentiveness and reacted to client input. The project supported research by Ranjan and Read (2021) indicated that companies using organized feedback systems and flexible communication strategies enhanced trust and were more successful at securing ongoing contracts. The present findings broadened this literature by showing how small cleaning businesses put communication excellence into action through targeted methods, such as

focused listening, documenting feedback, interpreting nonverbal signals, and maintaining structured follow-up procedures.

By anchoring communication in both relational sensitivity and procedural reliability, participants revealed how “customer-centric communication” became a tangible practice rather than remaining theoretical. This view of communication as a continually developing skill matched Kleinaltenkamp et al.’s (2022) conclusion that actively managing customer experiences through collaboration enhanced organizational outcomes in service sectors. In this project, communication excellence operated as both an interpersonal strength and a formal organizational process, helping foster trust, synchronize service delivery, and promote lasting client relationships.

Theme 4 Collaborative Value Creation

Participants explained that working collaboratively to create value served as a deliberate strategy to expand their range of services, improve their chances in competitive bidding, and obtain contracts that might have been out of reach. P1, P4, and P5 described collaboration as a deliberate business tactic rather than just casual teamwork. P1 focused on operational cohesion, noting, “We partnered with a local HVAC company and bid together for building maintenance contracts,” which showed how partnerships enabled bundled services that met clients’ preferences for integrated facility solutions. By contrast, P4 viewed collaboration mainly as a way to become eligible for contracts, saying, “Collaboration helped us win a contract we wouldn’t have qualified for alone.” While both participants highlighted winning contracts, P1 stressed expanding services through integration, while P4 pointed to overcoming limitations in scale and eligibility.

These differing viewpoints showed that collaboration fulfilled a range of strategic aims based on each organization's capabilities and market position.

P5 described collaboration as a method for both business development and increasing visibility, emphasizing the reputational advantages over simple bid qualification. P5 noted, "We co-hosted an event with a pest control company, which helped both our businesses," highlighting how joint marketing activities improved credibility through partnership. In contrast to P1 and P4, whose collaborations centered on operations and contract requirements, P5 focused on building relationships and trust within the local business community.

Taken together, these accounts demonstrated that collaboration operated across operational, reputational, and relationship based levels, aligning with SDL's emphasis on resource integration as a route to value co-creation (Albérico & Casaca, 2023; Chen & Chen, 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). By merging complementary strengths, participants increased their perceived value and trustworthiness, echoing findings that collaborative approaches led to better retention and client confidence (Albérico & Casaca, 2023; Chen & Chen, 2020). As collaborations evolved from isolated partnerships to more formal alliances, participants described various collaborative methods that further distinguished how value was co-created, which the following subthemes explored. Table 8 provides an overview of the subthemes under Theme 4, along with details about which participants and coded references corresponded to each subtheme.

Table 8*Theme 4: Collaborative Value Creation*

Subtheme	Participants	Coded References
Strategic Partnerships for Contract Access	P1, P4	9
Joint Service Offerings and Bundled Solutions	P1, P5	7
Collaborative Visibility and Credibility Building	P4, P5	6

Subtheme 4.1: Strategic Partnerships for Contract Access

Participants used strategic partnerships as an intentional approach that participants had used to address contract demands beyond their own organizational capabilities. P1 recounted establishing a formal relationship with another service provider, stating, “We partnered with a local HVAC company and bid together for building maintenance contracts.” This demonstrated a purposeful effort to broaden their service offerings by joining forces, which enabled P1 to present a comprehensive solution that matched commercial clients’ requirements for integrated facility management. By pooling specialized skills, the partnership allowed P1 to surpass previous limits in service range by presenting a combined package.

On the other hand, P4 viewed collaboration more as a strategy for satisfying eligibility criteria enforced by substantial contracts rather than as a way to expand. P4 shared, “Collaboration helped us win a contract we wouldn’t have qualified for alone,” indicating that partnership acted as a filter to gain entry rather than as a tool for growth. Both participants engaged in collaboration to secure contracts, but P1 focused on

combining capabilities, while P4 concentrated on overcoming barriers related to qualification and scale. These responses show how participants adapted partnership tactics in response to different structural challenges within the cleaning industry.

From an SDL viewpoint, such partnerships represented deliberate efforts to combine operant resources, relational capital, expertise, and knowledge to generate value that neither organization could achieve alone (Albérico & Casaca, 2023; Chen & Chen, 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). Instead of vying for scarce opportunities, participants utilized their relationships to jointly develop value propositions that met client expectations. This strategy corresponded with Chen and Chen's (2020) assertion that strategic alliances raised competitiveness by expanding the perceived range and dependability of services. Research in relationship marketing also reinforced this approach, showing that partnerships conveyed stability and professionalism, which lowered perceived risks for decision-makers (Albérico & Casaca, 2023). In this project, strategic partnerships constituted well-considered answers to market limitations, rather than accidental cooperation

Subtheme 4.2: Joint Service Offerings and Bundled Solutions

Joint service offerings functioned as a practical outgrowth of collaborative relationships, transforming partnership agreements into visible client-oriented solutions. P1 recalled how working together directly influenced the structure of their services, mentioning that joint proposals had enabled them to secure "building maintenance contracts" that encompassed a range of services under one contract. This strategy demonstrated how operational integration through partnerships had empowered

participants to fulfill client requests for simplified service management and minimized the need for handling multiple vendors.

P5, in contrast, viewed bundled solutions through a different perspective, stressing the importance of shared market presence over direct service combination. P5 noted, “We co-hosted an event with a pest control company, which helped both our businesses,” illustrating that collaboration could also serve as a method for collective market positioning rather than merging service delivery. While P1 highlighted operational integration within formal contract agreements, P5 emphasized reputational and relationship-based bundling through joint client outreach. This distinction showed that bundled solutions extended beyond service structures and included how participants presented value and trustworthiness to potential clients.

These varied strategies highlighted the SDL principle that beneficiaries determined value through experience and interaction, rather than through uniform products (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). Whether through comprehensive contracts or collaborative engagement events, participants worked with clients to co-create solutions that addressed broader facility requirements. This outcome matched Beuren et al. (2020), who observed that co-creation among small service businesses frequently resulted from collaborative innovation instead of technological progress. Research in relationship marketing also emphasized that bundled solutions strengthened trust and deepened relationships by reinforcing dependability and enhancing the participants’ embeddedness (Albers & Krafft, 2022). Independently (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). Rather than competing for a few available opportunities, participants utilized

partnership capital to jointly shape value propositions that met client needs. This approach reflected Chen and Chen's (2020) findings that strategic partnerships boosted competitiveness by broadening the perceived scope and reliability of services. Research in relationship marketing further supported this practice, showing that such partnerships communicated stability and professionalism, which helped alleviate perceived risks for decision-makers (Albérico & Casaca, 2023). Within this project, strategic alliances acted as deliberate solutions to market challenges rather than unintended collaborations.

Subtheme 4.3: Collaborative Visibility and Credibility Building

Collaboration also operated as a deliberate tactic to boost both visibility and credibility within competitive environments. P5 specifically described collaboration as a way to enhance reputation, highlighting that organizing joint events with related service providers fostered greater trust and awareness among prospective clients. Through this lens, collaboration became an active method for signaling legitimacy by associating with established or complementary providers.

By contrast, P4's view of collaboration was more narrowly focused on immediate outcomes, prioritizing contract attainment over broader brand development. P4's remark about "winning a contract we wouldn't have qualified for alone" revealed a transactional use of collaboration, using credibility as a tool for instant opportunity rather than ongoing market presence. This difference illustrated that participants adopted collaborative approaches for distinct strategic aims, some for short-term contract wins, others for longer-term positioning based on their business needs and available resources.

These accounts echoed the principles of relationship marketing, in which collaborative efforts to increase visibility helped partners exchange trust, enabling each organization to benefit from the credibility of the other (Albérico & Casaca, 2023). Clients read these collaborative activities as signs of legitimacy, dependability, and integration within a larger service network. The SDL framework further framed this process using the notion of service ecosystems, where participants pooled resources across networks to jointly create value at different levels (Albérico & Casaca, 2023; Edvardsson et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). Throughout this project, collaborative visibility was not a passive occurrence but a purposeful approach through which participants positioned themselves as reputable and capable partners within an established service ecosystem.

SDL Framework Connection

Theme 4 illustrated how the SDL framework emphasized the integration of resources and the creation of value through networks (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). Within this project, participants spoke about building alliances with service providers in areas like HVAC and pest control, which allowed them to combine strengths across different organizations and deliver outcomes that surpassed what single firms could accomplish alone. These methods demonstrated SDL's view of value co-creation, where service ecosystems made up of interconnected stakeholders generated value through collaborative resource integration rather than isolated efforts by individual companies (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2021).

The examples of joint service packages and shared initiatives described by participants highlighted SDL's concept that value creation went beyond one-on-one provider–client relationships and extended into wider networks (Vargo et al., 2020). By forming partnerships, participants gained access to operant resources, such as advanced skills, technical know-how, and a shared reputation, which they would not have possessed on their own. This reinforced SDL's focus on resource integration as a driver of competitive advantage in service environments (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). Participants in the project noted that collaboration not only improved professionalism and credibility but also served both as practical assets for expanding service offerings and as symbolic resources for building legitimacy and trust. This dual role was consistent with SDL's assertion that value creation drew from both tangible and intangible resources within service ecosystems (Ranjan & Read, 2021).

Literature Connection

These findings aligned with Bryson et al. (2021), Chen and Chen (2020), and Snihur and Wiklund (2019), all of whom demonstrated that strategic alliances improved growth and market access for small service businesses by facilitating resource sharing and risk distribution. Bryson et al. (2021) also observed that collaborative business models provided a competitive pathway for small enterprises to challenge larger firms with more substantial resources. Snihur and Wiklund (2019) furthered indicate that cooperative approaches sped up expansion in competitive service sectors by granting entrepreneurs access to capabilities and assets outside their own organizations.

The present project built on this literature by showing how partnerships specifically operated in the cleaning industry and by outlining the tangible collaborative practices participants described, such as bidding jointly on contracts with broader service needs, creating bundled service packages alongside complementary providers, and engaging in joint efforts to improve market reputation and visibility. The importance participants gave to collaboration as a strategy for expanding service portfolios and increasing professional credibility reinforced research on network-driven competitive advantage in small business environments (Garcia & Moraga, 2020).

Theme 5 Business Initiative and Proactive Outreach

Participants used business initiative and proactive outreach as key strategies for developing new business leads, as P1, P3, and P5 regularly described independent efforts to contact decision-makers rather than depending on passive referrals. P1 highlighted the importance of taking action through demonstrations, stating, “We don’t just wait on referrals; we go to where the clients are and show them what we can do.” This reflected a decision to pursue opportunities through visibility and engagement rather than waiting for potential clients to approach. In contrast, P5 outlined a methodical outreach routine, explaining, “We do door-to-door every week with flyers and sample offers.” Although both participants stressed face-to-face engagement, P1 viewed outreach as relationship building through demonstrations, while P5 focused on consistency and repetition to sustain awareness. These distinctions suggested that proactive outreach could be carried out in either flexible or systematic ways, depending on the participant’s business approach.

P3 contributed a different but complementary viewpoint by describing an outreach process rooted in market research and preparation prior to engagement. P3 noted, “I drive around and look for buildings, then research the property manager and send an intro email,” emphasizing the importance of environmental observation and targeted outreach to initiate contact. Unlike P1 and P5, whose approaches centered on immediate physical presence, P3 demonstrated initiative through careful planning and informed communication.

Despite these differences, all three participants showed initiative in discovering opportunities and starting value creation rather than waiting passively for inquiries. Across participants, proactive outreach was associated with building credibility and trust, as participants explained that being present, offering samples, or demonstrating readiness enabled potential clients to evaluate their competence directly. These actions aligned with the SDL view that value was created through the use of operant resources, knowledge, skills, and initiative within direct service interactions (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). Relationship-marketing literature also emphasized that purposeful outreach strengthened relationships and boosted contract wins in service industries (Turner & Endres, 2021; Zhang & Li, 2022). As participants built initial access and trust through proactive engagement, they refined these strategies into repeatable outreach methods, as explored further in the following subthemes. Table 9 summarizes the subthemes linked to Theme 5, along with information on participants and coded references supporting each subtheme.

Table 9*Theme 5: Business Initiative and Proactive Outreach*

Subtheme	Participants	Coded References
Direct Prospecting and Visibility	P1, P5	8
Systematic Market Scanning and Research	P3	6
Demonstration of Value Through Initiative	P1, P3, P5	9

Subtheme 5.1: Direct Prospecting and Visibility

Participants used direct prospecting, and visibility was highlighted as a key strategies of business initiative by P1 and P5, who both stressed that actively engaging with potential clients played a crucial role in starting new relationships. P1 described outreach as a purposeful effort to demonstrate their value, rather than a passive marketing approach, explaining, “We don’t just wait on referrals; we go to where the clients are and show them what we can do.” This perspective reflected the view that credibility developed through direct engagement and being present, which allowed clients to witness their skills firsthand rather than form perceptions based on promotional content. Conversely, P5 outlined a routine, methodical approach to prospecting, stating, “We do door-to-door every week with flyers and sample offers.” While both used face-to-face engagement, P1 focused on adapting to situations and showcasing abilities in context, whereas P5 relied on consistency and routine to ensure ongoing visibility and recognition. This difference demonstrated that direct prospecting could be approached with flexibility or structure, but both methods aimed to increase exposure to key decision-makers.

Viewed through the SDL lens, these actions represented the use of operant resources, initiative, social skills, and awareness of context to begin value co-creation at the moment of interaction (Vargo & Lusch, 2021; Zhang & Li, 2022). Instead of seeing outreach as a simple, one-sided effort, participants treated prospecting as a two-way process where clients could immediately evaluate service suitability and provider expertise. Relationship-marketing literature also stressed that frequent, in-person contact enhanced trust and reduced perceived risks in B2B service engagements by making providers more visible and responsible (Vargo & Lusch, 2021; Zhang & Li, 2022). Within this project, participants treated direct prospecting as more than a method for generating leads; it served as a relational indicator that participants were approachable, self-assured, and dedicated to fulfilling client needs.

Subtheme 5.2: Systematic Market Scanning and Research

In contrast to the strongly relationship-focused strategies used by P1 and P5, P3 adopted a more analytical and preparatory approach rooted in systematic market scanning. P3 explained, “I drive around and look for buildings, then research the property manager and send an intro email,” which highlighted a thoughtful process of identifying prospects before making contact. This method placed greater importance on collecting information and targeting strategically instead of direct, in-person interactions. While P1 and P5 had prioritized being visible through personal presence, P3 focused on ensuring relevance through thorough preparation, representing a distinct route to proactive outreach that centered on research rather than immediate demonstration.

This difference showed that business initiative was not consistent among participants but instead reflected individual preferences, communication choices, and available resources. This approach aligned with SDL perspective, P3's method showed how strategic planning and acquiring knowledge acted as operant resources that allowed value to be created before services were actually provided (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). Research in relationship marketing also supported this method, pointing out that targeted and informed outreach enhanced perceived professionalism and trustworthiness in initial meetings with potential clients (Turner & Endres, 2021). Within this project, systematic market scanning provided a basis for purposeful outreach, enabling P3 to approach decision-makers with relevant context rather than presenting standard proposals.

Subtheme 5.3: Demonstration of Value Through Initiative

For P1, P3, and P5, business initiatives consistently involved proving value prior to requesting any formal commitment. P1 highlighted that taking action and engaging directly allowed prospective clients to “see what we can do,” preferring tangible demonstrations over spoken assurances or marketing materials. P5 echoed this approach, sharing that presenting “sample offers” during door-to-door visits helped lower barriers and spark conversations using these examples primarily as trust-building mechanisms rather than mere incentives. While P3's approach was less centered on in-person demonstrations, their research-based outreach conveyed preparedness, purposefulness, and professionalism from the very start. Though the tactics varied, all three participants had described initiative as a means to decrease ambiguity and foster engagement.

Through the SDL lens, these actions reflected the idea that value was not inherent in services but emerged through interaction and practical application (Ranjan & Read, 2021; Vargo & Lusch, 2021). By investing time and effort in advance, whether through demonstrations, providing samples, or targeted outreach, participants actively welcomed clients into the value-creation experience ahead of any agreement. Relationship-marketing literature likewise noted that showing competence and responsiveness early on strengthened trust and increased the prospects for ongoing engagement (Zhang & Li, 2022). In this project, taking initiative served as both a strategic and relational resource, allowing participants to shape how clients perceived them, build credibility, and set themselves apart in a competitive market without relying on digital advertising.

SDL Framework Connection

Theme 5 was connected to SDL's emphasis on operant resources, particularly entrepreneurial initiative, market knowledge, and strategic thinking, as drivers of value creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). The proactive outreach strategies participants detailed included cold calling, door-to-door prospecting, researching decision-makers, and providing sample work, which reflected application of knowledge and skills to identify and engage potential clients, demonstrating how operant resources functioned as primary competitive advantages in service businesses (Edvardsson et al., 2020). A proactive initiative enabled participants to shape market opportunities rather than passively respond to existing demand, aligning with SDL's actor-oriented perspective, which emphasized that businesses actively constructed service ecosystems through strategic engagement (Vargo et al., 2020).

By researching, identifying decision-makers, creating target lists, and initiating contact rather than waiting for referrals, participants exercised agency in creating value-generation opportunities. This proactive stance reflected SDL's principle that value co-creation required active participation from all actors within service ecosystems (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). The participants' emphasis that proactivity "demonstrated confidence and professionalism" illustrated how strategic behaviors functioned as signals of competence and reliability, contributing to trust-building that SDL identified as foundational to service relationships (Ranjan & Read, 2021). Free initial cleanings and sample work represented investments in demonstrating value potential, aligning with SDL's recognition that value realization often required upfront resource commitments from service providers.

Literature Connection

These findings supported Turner and Endres (2021), who emphasized that proactive business development approaches distinguished successful small service businesses from less successful competitors who relied primarily on reactive lead generation. Garcia and Moraga (2020) similarly found that entrepreneurial initiative and strategic outreach enhanced visibility and credibility for resource-constrained small businesses competing in saturated markets. The findings extended prior research by identifying specific proactive strategies that proved effective in the commercial cleaning industry: targeted research to identify decision-makers, door-to-door prospecting in underserved areas, strategic cold calling, and provision of free sample services.

These concrete practices operationalized the abstract concept of "entrepreneurial orientation" that appears in small business literature. The observation that proactivity "resonated with facilities managers who were used to vendors waiting on referrals" provided insight into how strategic behaviors differentiated small firms in competitive service markets. This finding supported recent research by Nasir et al. (2023), who found that SMEs demonstrating proactive engagement and initiative achieved greater business development success than those employing passive marketing approaches.

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice

This project offered practical insights for small business strategy in service-oriented sectors, aiming to expand without relying solely on digital marketing. For small cleaning service businesses, the results demonstrate that significant growth is attainable through individualized client engagement, forming strategic partnerships, and fostering a visible local presence. When these approaches are applied consistently, they reinforce the company's reputation for reliability and professionalism, leading to frequent referrals and renewal of contracts (Zhang & Li, 2022). The outcomes support a shift from heavy dependence on social media advertising to more direct, relationship-centered methods that provide immediate and meaningful connections with prospective clients (Wang & Huang, 2023). The leaders in the cleaning industry who took part in this project described putting in place organized systems for networking, such as employing tracking tools for client follow-up and performance assessment. They noted that introducing repeatable processes for outreach and service execution supported business growth while preserving high standards.

Participants also highlighted the importance of customized engagement with clients, which included conducting site-specific evaluations, maintaining open lines of communication, and offering operational adaptability. By presenting tailored value offerings, participants reported moving away from transactional interactions toward more sustained partnerships built on ongoing dialogue. Previous research likewise found that organized networking, systematic relationship management, and flexible engagement strategies were effective for small service businesses seeking long-term growth (Alsaawi et al., 2021; Bryson et al., 2021). These practices are in line with service-dominant logic, which stresses value creation through ongoing relationships rather than single transactions (Edvardsson et al., 2020; Ranjan & Read, 2021).

Another recommendation that emerged from the project involved purposefully enhancing professional credibility. Participants indicated that seeking certifications, keeping consistent branding, and establishing workforce development programs strengthen perceptions of dependability and professionalism. These actions improve access to larger contracts and institutional collaborations, especially in situations with heightened health and safety requirements.

The findings of this project advanced professional practice by demonstrating that upholding industry standards, maintaining procedural rigor, and utilizing documented quality measures enhanced the trust of clients and the perceived value of services delivered by small cleaning business leaders. Mirroring earlier findings (Asare & Prempeh, 2023; Beuren et al., 2020), participants indicated these actions reinforced their credibility and fostered lasting business partnerships. Additionally, participants

highlighted that engaging in collaborative ventures and proactive outreach, such as community engagement, direct outreach to key decision-makers, and involvement in local events and industry expos, proved effective for boosting visibility and winning contracts. In light of these insights, small cleaning service leaders are advised to adopt standardized work processes, robust quality control systems, and organized networking initiatives to improve service dependability, deepen client connections, and achieve sustained business growth (Bryson et al., 2021; Chen & Chen, 2020).

Implications for Social Change

The results of this project indicated that small cleaning service leaders fostered positive social change by advancing ethical, inclusive, and community-oriented business behaviors in their local areas. Through relationship-focused methods such as attentive listening, building trust, and open communication, participants cultivated respectful and professional relationships with clients, staff, and community members. These actions supported social change by strengthening trust between small businesses and the community, ensuring dependable service, and helping create healthier, safer, and more stable environments for both clients and local organizations. By emphasizing strong relationships rather than short-term transactions, these small businesses showed their ability to shape community expectations around professionalism and fairness.

Participants also shared that they relied on offline approaches, such as face-to-face networking, forming partnerships within the community, and direct local involvement to find new opportunities without depending on expensive advertising or sophisticated digital systems. These methods supported social change by lowering

barriers that typically restrict entrepreneurs with limited financial or technological means. By focusing on person-centered outreach instead of costly marketing, participants opened doors for minority-owned companies, women business owners, and people from underserved communities. Participants described using direct communication, referrals, and engagement through local networks to reduce financial barriers associated with traditional advertising.

Furthermore, the project underscored how the business practices led by participants benefited the community's overall well-being, extending beyond the achievements of individual firms. By participating locally, working collaboratively with other service businesses, and keeping their operations visible and ethical, participants strengthened trust and unity in their communities. These efforts boosted job opportunities, supported stable employment, and enhanced the acceptance of service entrepreneurship as a respected career path. Together, the experiences of these small cleaning companies demonstrated their potential to act as catalysts for social progress, encouraging broad economic inclusion, reinforcing local bonds, and aiding sustainable development within their neighborhoods.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future studies should build upon this project's findings by exploring creative client engagement methods in diverse geographic and cultural settings. While this research centered on small cleaning service providers from select U.S. regions, service-based companies in rural areas, international markets, or underserved communities may face varying institutional factors, cultural traditions, and expectations from decision-

makers. Comparative research across different regions could offer a richer understanding of how local context affects the success of relationship-driven, non-social media strategies for securing contracts.

Another recommendation is for researchers to employ longitudinal studies to follow the application and impacts of the engagement approaches highlighted in this project over extended periods. Such research designs would enable scholars to observe how methods like proactive outreach, targeted networking, and collaboration develop as businesses expand and change. Longitudinal approaches are especially valuable for evaluating the endurance, flexibility, and lasting effects of qualitative insights (Nowell et al., 2017). Monitoring these practices over time may also reveal how small cleaning companies can adjust their strategies in response to evolving market or organizational conditions.

Further research could also compare related service sectors, such as home healthcare, landscaping, or facilities management, where building trust and maintaining close client relationships are equally important. Studying these fields might uncover both shared practices and unique features in non-digital engagement approaches. Researchers can also consider developing structured models or qualitative measures to evaluate the success of relationship-focused methods in contexts where standard digital metrics are lacking. Existing studies indicate that service innovation and relationship building differ across industries, highlighting the benefit of examining multiple service domains (Kumar & Singh, 2021).

Conclusion

This qualitative pragmatic inquiry design examined innovative strategies that small cleaning service leaders use to engage decision-makers and secure contracts without relying on social media. Data were gathered through semistructured interviews with business leaders from cleaning service companies in the United States. Thematic analysis identified five main themes: client engagement through personal connection; strategic networking as a growth catalyst; communication excellence and active listening; collaborative value creation; and business initiative and proactive outreach. These themes demonstrate how participants combined relationship-building activities, high-touch communication, and community involvement to win and keep clients in a competitive sector.

The findings of this project contribute to both academic understanding and practical business guidance for service-based microenterprises. SDL provides a theoretical framework for understanding the co-creative nature of client-provider relationships. The results showed that value creation depends on active engagement, responsiveness, and trust, not just service delivery. For cleaning service business leaders, especially those with limited capital or digital resources, this project provided actionable, repeatable strategies for expanding their client base and professional reputation. These insights support local economic growth and empower underrepresented entrepreneurs in the wider business community.

References

- Akaka, M. A., & Vargo, S. L. (2014). Technology as an operant resource in service (eco)systems. *Information Systems and e-Business Management*, 12(3), 367–384. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10257-013-0220-5>
- Albérico, R., & Casaca, J. A. (2023). Relationship marketing and customer retention: A systematic literature review. *Studies in Business and Economics*, 18(3), 44–55. <https://doi.org/10.2478/sbe-2023-0044>
- Albers, S., & Krafft, M. (2022). Relationship marketing: Theoretical foundations and research directions. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 50(3), 537–559. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-021-00828-2>
- Alsaawi, A., Althonayan, A., & Baines, T. (2021). Strategic relationship management in service-based SMEs: A study of customer engagement and long-term value creation. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 28(5), 762–778. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSBED-09-2020-0349>
- Asare, E. N., & Prempeh, K. B. (2023). Enhancing competitiveness of cleaning service SMEs through customer engagement strategies. *International Journal of Services and Operations Management*, 44(2), 173–194. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSOM.2023.100541>
- Avram, K. A. (2025). Introducing the staged narrative analysis: A comprehensive framework to analyze multi-layered and complex narrative data. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 26(1), Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-26.1.4114>

- Bessant, J., & Tidd, J. (2020). Innovation and entrepreneurship in cleaning services: Opportunities for small businesses. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation Management*, 24(4), 367-385.
<https://doi.org/10.1504/IJEIM.2020.107904>
- Beuren, I. M., dos Santos, V. F., & Theiss, V. (2020). Co-creation and innovation: A study in service small businesses. *Revista Brasileira de Gestão de Negócios*, 22(3), 515–532. <https://doi.org/10.7819/rbgn.v22i3.4076>
- Borg, C. (2024). Qualitative naturalistic research. *Encyclopedia of Translation and Interpreting*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11526430>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2024). Supporting best practice in reflexive thematic analysis reporting in Palliative Medicine: A review of published research and introduction to the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG). *Palliative Medicine*, 38(1), 3–7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02692163241234800>
- Bryson, J. R., Mulhall, R., Song, M., & Kenny, M. (2021). Networking for competitiveness: The digital transformation of service-based SMEs. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 59(1), 50–69.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00472778.2020.1718667>
- Chen, L., & Chen, H. (2020). Strategic alliances and their impact on small cleaning service firms' growth. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 27(4), 529-547. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSBED-12-2019-0398>

- Chew-Graham, C. A. (2025). Reflections on the use of qualitative research methods: It's not 'fluffy'. *British Journal of General Practice*, 75(755), 244.
<https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp25X734625>
- Dharamsi, S., Kuper, A., & Till, J. E. (2021). Ethnography as an evolving method for supporting healthcare improvement. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 21, Article 103. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-021-01466-9>
- Edvardsson, B., Skålén, P., & Tronvoll, B. (2020). Service ecosystems: Extending service-dominant logic. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 48(1), 15–32. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-019-00680-0>
- Elgeddawy, M., & Abouraia, M. (2024). Pragmatism as a research paradigm. *Proceedings of the European Conference on Research Methodology for Business and Management Studies*, 23(1), 71–74. <https://doi.org/10.34190/ecrm.23.1.2444>
- Faulkner, S. S., & Faulkner, C. A. (2024). Pragmatism: An essential philosophy for mixed methods research in education. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 8(3), 73–80.
<https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.803073>
- Garcia, R., & Moraga, M. (2020). Innovation management in cleaning services: A pathway to competitive advantage. *Journal of Business Research*, 113, 200-208.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.03.044>
- Helms, M. M., & Adams, J. (2020). Exploring the role of strategic planning and agility in the cleaning services industry. *Management Decision*, 58(12), 2685-2703.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-04-2020-0513>

- Hsiao, Y. C., Lin, L. Y., Wang, M. C., & Yu, H. (2022). Enhancing SME service innovation: The role of co-creation and network relationships. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, *102*, 103122.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2022.103122>
- Jensen, T. B., Vatrapu, R., & Bjørn-Andersen, N. (2020). Avatars of the innovation diffusion theory in e-government research: Systematic review and a research agenda. *Government Information Quarterly*, *37*(3), 101449.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2020.101449>
- Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, *33*(7), 14–26.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033007014>
- Khan, I., Khan, M. A., Khan, M. N., Shah, S. Z. A., & Iqbal, M. (2024). The impact of SMEs' capability for service innovation and its tactical green marketing on sustainable business performance. *Journal of Small Business Strategy*, *34*(3), 87–102. <https://doi.org/10.53703/001c.117659>
- Kleinaltenkamp, M., Brodie, R. J., Frow, P., & Hughes, T. (2022). Managing the customer experience: Insights from service-dominant logic. *Journal of Business Research*, *148*, 88–100. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.04.029>
- Komakech, R. A., Ombati, T. O., Kikwatha, R. W., & Wainaina, M. G. (2025). Resource-based view theory and its applications in supply chain management: A systematic literature review. *Management Science Letters*, *15*(1), 1–12.
<https://doi.org/10.5267/j.msl.2024.6.004>

- Kumar, A., & Singh, R. (2021). Innovation in service delivery: A case study of small cleaning businesses. *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, 32(1), 11-28. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSIM-09-2020-0280>
- Liu, Y., Chen, Y., & Tao, R. (2021). Digital transformation and firm performance: The role of innovation. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 166, 120638. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2021.120638>
- Mailani, D., Hulu, M. Z. T., Simamora, M. R., & Kesuma, S. A. (2024). Resource-based view theory to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage of the firm: Systematic literature review. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Sustainability Studies*, 4(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.31098/ijeass.v4i1.2002>
- Makateng, D. S., & Mokala, N. T. (2025). Understanding qualitative research methodology: A systematic review. *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, 6(3), 327–335. <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2025637>
- Marques, C., Ferreira, J. J., Zaman, R., & Ferreira, F. A. (2020). Digital transformation in SMEs: Challenges and opportunities for value creation. *Journal of Business Research*, 112, 409–417. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.11.044>
- Muninger, M. I., Hammedi, W., & Mahr, D. (2023). Digital service innovation: How firms use digital technologies for customer engagement and co-creation. *Journal of Business Research*, 157, 113666. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.113666>
- Nasir, M. A., Al Mamun, A., & Breen, J. (2023). Value co-creation and SME resilience during crises: Evidence from service-based industries. *Service Industries Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02642069.2023.2193021>

- Nguyen, T. H., Ngo, L. V., & Ruël, H. (2022). Developing innovation capability in SMEs: The role of networking and strategic fit. *Journal of Small Business Management*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472778.2022.2111527>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *16*(1), 1609406917733847.
- Park, C.-I., & Namkung, Y. (2022). The effects of Instagram marketing activities on customer-based brand equity in the coffee industry. *Sustainability*, *14*(3), Article 1657. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14031657>
- Pillai, K. G., Goldsmith, R. E., & Hofacker, C. F. (2021). Customer feedback systems: Enhancing firm innovativeness. *Journal of Business Research*, *124*, 634–643. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.02.048>
- Ramanadhan, S., Revette, A., Lee, R., & Aveling, E. (2021). Pragmatic approaches to analyzing qualitative data for implementation science: An introduction. *Implementation Science Communication*, *2*(70), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43058-021-00174-1>
- Ranjan, K. R., & Read, S. (2021). Value co-creation: Concept and measurement. *Journal of Service Theory and Practice*, *31*(2), 205–228. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSTP-06-2020-0134>
- Rather, R. A. (2021). Customer experience and engagement in tourism destinations: The experiential marketing perspective. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, *38*(1), 27–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2020.1865513>

- Rebiazina, V., Sharko, E., & Berezka, S. (2024). The impact of relationship marketing practices on companies' market and financial performance in emerging markets. *Journal of Economics, Finance and Administrative Science*, 29(57), 186–204. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEFAS-01-2022-0034>
- Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Diffusion of innovations* (5th ed.). Free Press.
- Sale, J. E. M., & Carlin, L. (2025). The reliance on conceptual frameworks in qualitative research – a way forward. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 25, Article 36. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-025-02461-0>
- Sipos, N., Neacșu, N.-A., Ionescu, A., Stăncioiu, A.-F., & Mirea, L. (2025). Resource-based view of marketing innovation in SMEs: A multi-country empirical analysis based on the global competitiveness project. *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, 14(1), 4. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13731-025-00573-x>
- Snihur, Y., & Wiklund, J. (2019). Searching for innovation: Product, process, and business model innovations and search behavior in established firms. *Long Range Planning*, 52(3), 320–342. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2018.05.003>
- Turner, R., & Endres, M. (2021). Social capital and business networks in the small firm sector: The case of commercial cleaning services. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 28(3), 381-399. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSBED-08-2020-0293>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1979). *The Belmont Report: Ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research*

(DHEW Publication No. OS 78-0012). <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/index.html>

Utama, M. L. A., Winarno, A., & Pratikto, H. (2025). The role of relationship marketing variables, word of mouth, customer delight in building customer satisfaction and loyalty: A systematic literature review. *Dinasti International Journal of Education Management and Social Science*, 6(3), 1913–1921.

<https://doi.org/10.38035/dijemss.v6i3.3869>

van der Valk, W., Schippers, J., & Wynstra, F. (2020). Buyer-supplier engagement for services innovation: The role of relational and contractual governance. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 88, 1–10.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2020.03.005>

Vargo, S. L., Koskela-Huotari, K., & Baron, S. (2020). A systems perspective on markets – Toward a research agenda. *Journal of Business Research*, 117, 397–407.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.06.004>

Vargo, S. L., & Lusch, R. F. (2021). Service-dominant logic 2025. *Journal of Service Science and Management*, 14(2), 189–204.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jssm.2021.142012>

Wang, L., & Huang, J. (2023). Leveraging digital platforms for business development: Insights from the cleaning service industry. *Journal of Business Strategy*, 44(2),

125-142. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JBS-07-2022-0145>

Yan, L., Echeverria, V., Nieto, G. F., Jin, Y., Swiecki, Z., Zhao, L., Gašević, D., &

Martinez-Maldonado, R. (2023). *Human–AI collaboration in thematic analysis*.

<https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2311.03999>

Zhang, Y., & Li, X. (2022). Relationship marketing and its impact on contract acquisition in the cleaning industry. *Service Industries Journal*, 42(5-6), 321-340.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02642069.2022.2021159>

Appendix: Interview Questions

1. What effective and innovative strategies have you found most effective in engaging decision-makers outside of social media marketing?
2. What effective and innovative strategies outside of social media marketing have helped you secure a contract?
3. How do you differentiate your services from competitors when presenting them to potential clients?
4. What challenges have you faced when implementing non-social media strategies for contract acquisition?
5. What strategies have you found to be most effective in attracting new clients, and how did you develop or adapt these strategies?
6. How do you measure the effectiveness of your strategies in engaging decision-makers and securing contracts?
7. What else would you like to tell me about the strategies you use to engage key decision-makers and win contracts?