

NZ CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE

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PRESS RELEASE

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Waikato Business Awards open for entries – new small business categories signal fresh era for region’s brightest businesses

The Waikato Chamber of Commerce will open entries for the 2026 Waikato Business Awards (WBA) on 28 April, with a significant new development: a suite of dedicated award categories designed specifically for small businesses across the region.

The Small Business Award categories represent a milestone for the Awards, recognising that while smaller operators have always been eligible to enter the WBA, competing alongside large, well-resourced organisations has not always been a level playing field.

While the usual categories in the main awards remain, the new categories are tailored to reflect the scale and realities of running a small business, with streamlined entry requirements and criteria that celebrate what small businesses do exceptionally well.

Waikato Chamber of Commerce events manager Rebecca Aston says the introduction of the small business categories is a direct response to the Chamber's membership base and the economic landscape of the region.

“Small businesses are the backbone of the Waikato economy, and they deserve their own moment to shine. These new categories give our smaller operators who are doing remarkable things every day a genuinely accessible pathway onto a prestigious stage.

New categories, new opportunities

The Small Business Award categories recognise excellence in growth, marketing, and service – each designed to be assessed on criteria appropriate to a business's scale. They follow the same structure and judging pattern as the main Waikato Business Awards but with a streamlined entry process to allow judges to gain a clear picture without placing an undue administrative burden on small teams.

To be eligible, businesses must have been operating for at least one year, employ between 3 and 12 full-time equivalent staff, and have an annual turnover between \$250,000 and \$1.5 million (excluding GST). Businesses may enter a maximum of two Small Business Award categories, with an entry fee of \$99 + GST per category.

Finalists will take part in a 30-minute interview with two to three judges, giving each business the chance to bring their story to life. Category winners will be announced at the finalists

announcement event in September, and will then progress to the WBA Gala Dinner on 6 November at Claudelands Arena, where one outstanding business will be named Small Business of the Year.

The Small Business of the Year Award replaces the former Emerging Business of the Year Award and is proudly sponsored by Sleepyhead. Small business category winners will not be eligible for the Supreme Award but will be included among nominees for the People's Choice Award.

New head judge and new judges

The 2026 Awards will be led by new head judge Jason Trower, who joins a number of new judges who bring fresh perspectives and diverse expertise to the process. The Chamber warmly welcomes all incoming judges and acknowledges the significant commitment they make in contributing their time and experience to recognising business excellence in the Waikato.

Jason acknowledges the current environment is a challenging one for many businesses, but says that makes recognition all the more meaningful.

“There’s no question that businesses across the Waikato are navigating a tough economic climate right now. Many are working harder than ever just to hold their ground, let alone grow. But that’s exactly why this year’s Awards matter so much. The businesses entering in 2026 are the ones choosing to back themselves, to reflect on what they’ve achieved, put it on paper, and say: we’re proud of what we’ve built. That takes courage, and it deserves to be celebrated. I’m looking forward to being inspired by the stories we see come through.”

WBA entries are from 28 April until 22 June. To support prospective entrants, the Chamber is running three free online entry help sessions on 12 May, 28 May and 11 June.

For more information and to enter, visit the Waikato Chamber of Commerce website or contact the Chamber directly.

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Waikato Business Award categories

- Business Growth & Strategy – *Sponsored by Deloitte*
- Community Contribution – *Sponsored by Montana Food & Events*
- For Purpose - *Sponsored by Trust Waikato*
- Innovation - *Sponsored by Company-X*
- International Trade - *Sponsored by Oyonnx*
- Marketing - *Sponsored by Kiwibank*
- People & Culture - *Sponsored by Hamilton Airport*
- Service Excellence - *Sponsored by Union Square*
- Small Business Growth
- Small Business Marketing – *Sponsored by Point B Strategic Marketing*
- Small Business Service Excellence
- Sustainability - *Sponsored by Wintec*
- People's Choice - *Sponsored by Air New Zealand*
- Small Business of the Year - *Sponsored by Sleepyhead*
- Emerging Leader of the Year - *Sponsored by 2degree*
- CEO of the Year - *Sponsored by The University of Waikato*
- Supreme Winner - *Fosters*