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Record entries, new small business categories popular as Business Awards finalists are named

The Waikato Chamber of Commerce has today named the finalists for the 2026 Waikato Business Awards, capping an entry season that was up on last year.

The new Small Business Award categories were well supported in their debut year. There were also a significant number of entries in the For Purpose category.

Waikato Chamber of Commerce chief executive Don Good says the increase is a vote of confidence from a business community that has had a demanding few years.

“When conditions are tight, entering an awards programme is one of the first things that gets pushed down the list. So the fact that entries are up on last year tells you something about this region. Businesses here are still backing themselves, still investing in their people, and still prepared to put their work in front of independent judges.”

The Small Business Award categories – introduced this year for businesses employing between 3 and 12 full-time equivalent staff with annual turnover between \$250,000 and \$1.5 million – were well supported, attracting a large number of entries from across the region.

Chamber events manager Rebecca Aston says the response has validated the decision to create a dedicated pathway for smaller operators.

“We built these categories because we kept hearing the same thing from members: they wanted to take part, but they didn’t fancy being measured against organisations ten times their size. The number of entries we received says we got that right. They came in from every corner of the region, and the standard was high.”

Four of this year’s finalists are South Waikato businesses – Blue Pacific Minerals, Sanctuary Mountain Maungatautari, Satco, and Waratah NZ. The Chamber has been a consistent advocate for the district through a period in which its operators have done it tough, and has a three-year partnership with South Waikato District Council that puts dedicated Chamber support on the ground there.

“South Waikato businesses have had a hard run, and we’ve been vocal about that, because what the district needed was advocacy rather than sympathy. Four finalists from there is a reminder that there are outstanding businesses operating there,” says Don.

Entries into the For Purpose Award, sponsored by Trust Waikato, were significant this year – a result that head judge Jason Trower says demonstrates the depth and strength of the philanthropic and not-for-profit sector in the Waikato, and the increasingly commercial way in which those organisations are being run.

The Chamber is also pleased to announce Hobbiton as the new sponsor of the Service Excellence Award. One of the country's best-known visitor destinations, Hobbiton brings to the category an operator whose own reputation has been built on the quality of the experience it delivers, day in and day out.

"Service excellence is something Hobbiton lives and breathes, so this is a natural fit. We are delighted to have them on board, and grateful for their support of the Awards," says Rebecca.

Winners of the three Small Business Award categories are:

Small Business Growth – Sign Logic

Small Business Marketing – Between Two Beers

Small Business Service Excellence – True Store

All three now progress to the Gala Dinner on November 6 at Claudelands Arena, where one will be named Small Business of the Year.

Finalists in the main award categories now progress to the Gala Dinner, where category winners will be announced along with the Supreme Winner, CEO of the Year, and the People's Choice Award.

To purchase gala dinner tickets and to vote for the People's Choice Award, go to www.waikatobusinessawards.co.nz

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2026 Waikato Business Awards finalists

Listed alphabetically within each category.

Business Growth & Strategy Award

Blue Pacific Minerals

Hamilton Airport

Specialised Roding Equipment

Tainui Group Holdings

Community Contribution Award

HMC

Restore Native

The Village Co.

Emerging Leader of the Year Award

David Remmerswaal (Dimple Digital)

Rodney Young (Gallagher)

Sam Cooper (IVS Group)

For Purpose Award

Creative Waikato

Dress for Success Hamilton

St Vincent de Paul Hamilton

Innovation Award

Action Manufacturing

Sanctuary Mountain Maungatautari

Satco

International Trade Award

Radix Nutrition

Waratah NZ

Marketing Award

Hamilton & Waikato Tourism

New Zealand National Fieldays Society

Waitomo Group

People & Culture Award

Complete Flooring

JCC Build

Waratah NZ

Service Excellence Award

Bettle-Associates

JetPark Hamilton

Montana Group

Sustainability Award

Hamilton Airport

New Zealand National Fieldays Society

Pact Steel

Sanctuary Mountain Maungatautari

Small Business of the Year Award

Between Two Beers

Sign Logic

True Store