

**EXPLORERS' EDGE**

# Big Applause Awards 2026

## Event Insights Brief

May 12–19, 2026 · Huntsville Region · Slido Event Polling Data

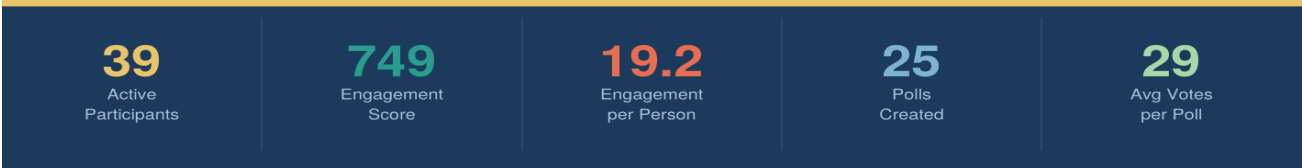


Figure 1: At-a-glance engagement metrics from the Big Applause Awards 2026

The Big Applause Awards brought together 39 active tourism industry participants for a half-day event combining recognition, learning, and strategic discussion. The event generated 745 poll votes across 25 Slido polls, with a total engagement score of 749 and an average of 19.2 engagement actions per participant — reflecting strong, sustained participation throughout the full program.

## 1. Awards & Recognition

### 1.1 Streamlined Category Format

This year's event introduced a single award category focused on exceptional service and overall community impact, replacing the previous multi-category structure. Attendee response was strongly positive, with the large majority finding the change made nomination easier and clearer.

#### Streamlined Award Format: Was It Easier?

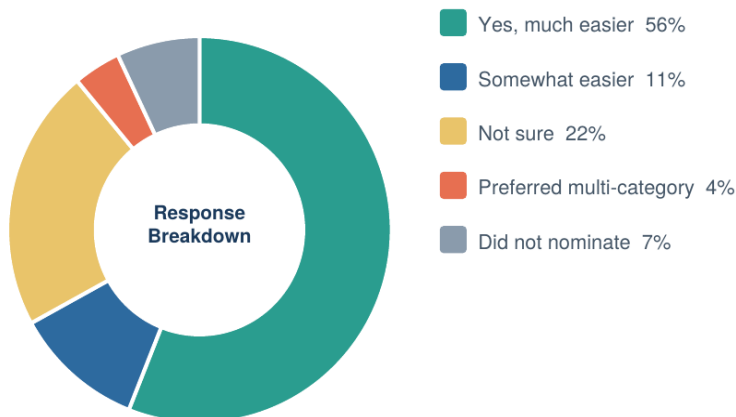


Figure 2: Attendee feedback on the streamlined single-category award format

*“67% of attendees found the streamlined format easier to use, and only 4% preferred returning to multiple categories. The simplified approach was widely praised as accessible and clear.”*

## 1.2 Future Award Categories — What Attendees Want

---

When asked what recognition categories should be introduced in future years, a single theme dominated open responses: volunteers. Additional themes spanned youth, back-of-house workers, event organizers, and community connectors.

- **Volunteers** — volunteer recognition in each community (most frequently cited across all open responses)
- **Youth & Students** — youth and student categories (multiple respondents specifically noted the youth award is missed)
- **Community Events** — event-focused categories recognizing collaborative tourism products such as Winterfest and Forest of Light
- **Community Connectors** — individuals who bring different sectors together toward shared goals
- **Back-of-House Staff** — front-of-house and behind-the-scenes staff who keep tourism running
- **Sector Recognition** — RTO board members, private, public, and NFP sector distinctions

## 1.3 Suggested Improvements for Next Year

---

- Grow attendance significantly — attendees want “the room filled with 200+ people and politicians too”
- Extend the meet-and-greet / networking portion to strengthen sector connections
- Post nominee profiles and video clips in the weeks leading up to the event
- Increase ecosystem-wide promotion; several respondents were surprised by low attendance
- Add youth recognition, possibly at a separate time of year outside the main awards cycle

## 2. Shoulder Season Challenges

Participants identified their most significant challenges during fall and winter shoulder seasons. Weather and travel disruptions ranked as the single biggest concern, followed closely by fluctuating visitor demand and staffing pressures.

### Biggest Challenges During Fall & Winter Shoulder Seasons

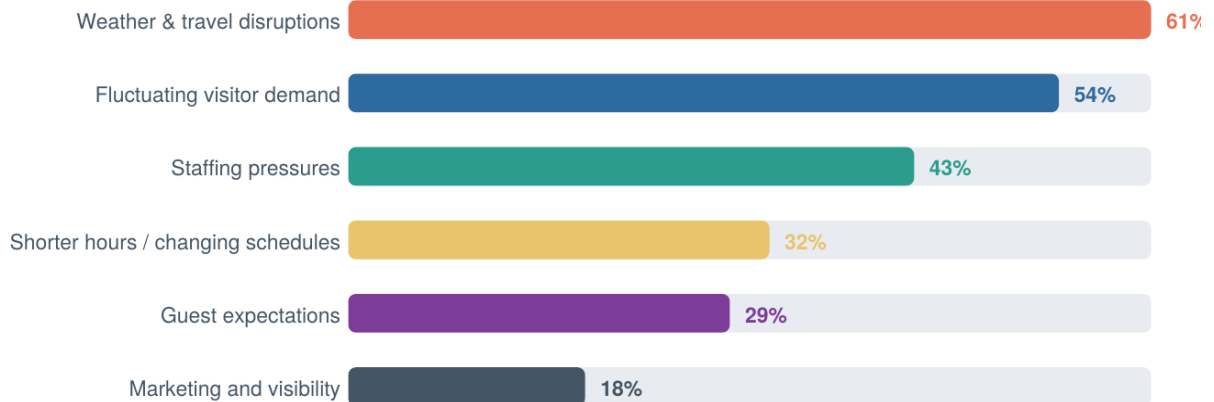


Figure 3: Top challenges faced during fall and winter shoulder seasons (% selecting, multiple answers permitted)

### 2.1 How Attendees Describe Tourism Workers in These Seasons

When asked to choose one word to describe the people who make tourism work through difficult shoulder seasons, the word cloud of responses reveals a workforce defined by resilience, passion, and adaptability:

*Top words: Resilient · Passionate · Dedicated · Innovative · Welcoming · Adaptable · Courageous · Creative · Knowledgeable · Thoughtful · Joyful · Committed*

### 2.2 What Exceptional Visitor Service Looks Like

In a ranking poll asking what matters most in exceptional visitor service, local knowledge and a warm welcome emerged as the clear top priorities, with problem-solving and behind-the-scenes support ranking lower:

### What Matters Most in Exceptional Visitor Service (Ranked)

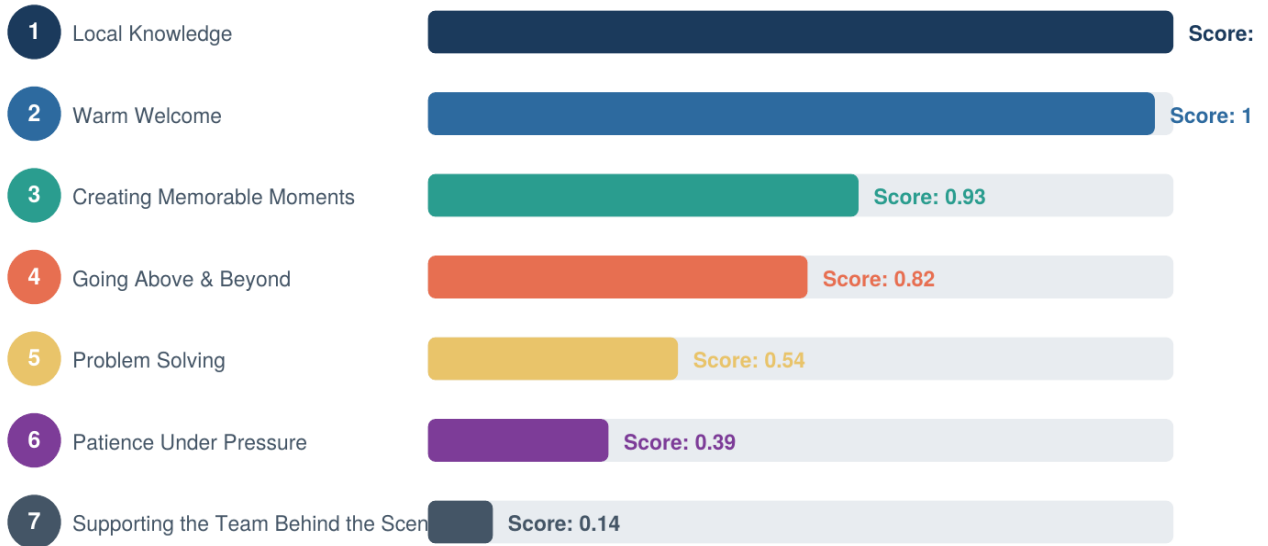


Figure 4: Visitor service priorities ranked by attendees (weighted score: higher = more important)

### 3. AI & Digital Readiness

A presentation on AI and digital discoverability prompted rich engagement. The word cloud responses to “what comes to mind when you hear AI and tourism” surfaced a mix of optimism and uncertainty — from “opportunity” and “innovative” to “confusion” and “mixed feelings” — reflecting a sector in active transition.

#### 3.1 Current Online Confidence

When asked how confident they are that travelers can find their business online, most respondents expressed moderate confidence, with room for meaningful improvement:

41% Very Confident · 50% Somewhat Confident · 9% Not Very Confident

#### 3.2 AI Tool Awareness

Participants were asked whether they have ever searched for their own business or destination using an AI tool like ChatGPT or Google Gemini. The results reveal a sector that is curious but largely untested:

- **57%** — have never done so but plan to — the largest single group
- **33%** — have searched and liked what they saw
- **5%** — found the AI result was inaccurate
- **5%** — have never searched and would not know where to start

#### 3.3 Biggest Opportunities Identified

After hearing the presentation on AI search and digital discoverability, attendees identified their single biggest opportunity from a list of options. Improving website content ranked first by a significant margin:

##### Biggest AI & Digital Opportunities (Post-Presentation)

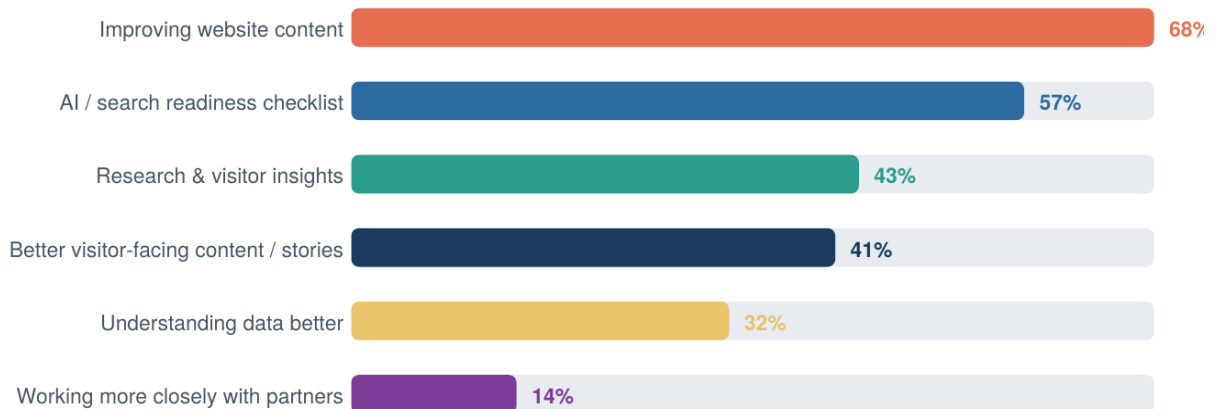


Figure 5: Biggest AI and digital opportunities identified by attendees post-presentation (multiple answers permitted)

### 3.4 Support Requested from Explorers' Edge & Destination Ontario

Attendees were also asked what type of support would be most valuable. Website and content audit guidance topped the list, closely followed by an AI and search readiness checklist:

#### Support Requested from Explorers' Edge / Destination Ontario

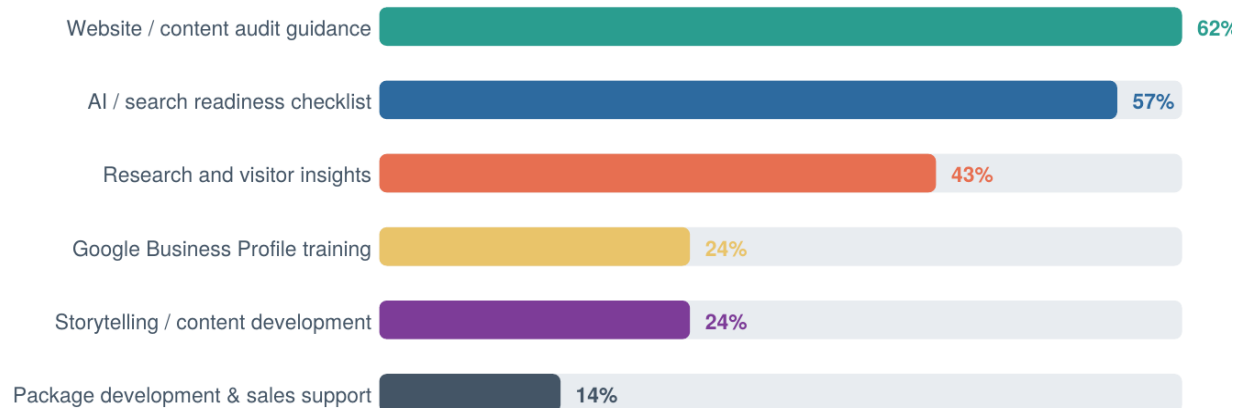


Figure 6: Support most requested from Explorers' Edge and Destination Ontario (multiple answers permitted)

### 3.5 Committed 30-Day Actions (Open Responses)

When asked what one practical step they could take in the next 30 days, attendees offered concrete, action-oriented commitments:

- Conducting a full website audit and removing outdated content, events, and articles
- Reviewing their business reputation and search presence using AI health tools
- Recycling and refreshing existing content rather than creating from scratch
- Focusing on keyword strategy: fewer, stronger keywords
- Reviewing and updating FAQ pages
- Doing a full inventory of their public-facing digital footprint

## 4. Geofencing & Visitor Data

A presentation on geofencing and visitor data analytics generated some of the event's highest engagement. The session challenged attendees to examine their assumptions about visitors and consider what data-driven decisions they could make.

### 4.1 Current Understanding of Visitors

Before the presentation, attendees rated how well they feel they understand where their visitors come from:

17% Very well · 61% Somewhat well · 22% Not very well · 0% Not at all or rely on gut instinct

### 4.2 Visitor Questions Businesses Most Want Answered

Attendees selected the visitor questions most relevant to their own businesses. Off-season traffic was the dominant concern — a clear signal for the region's data and marketing strategy:

#### Visitor Questions Businesses Most Want Answered

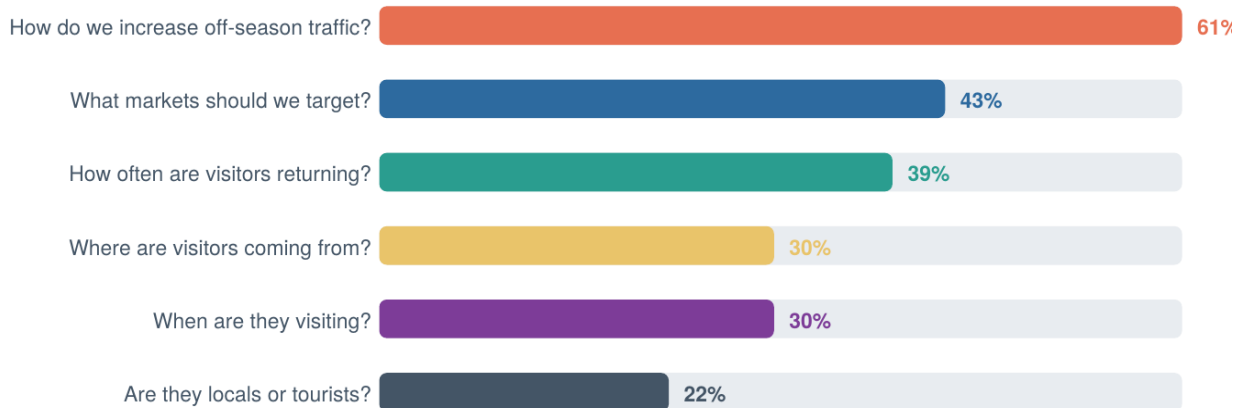


Figure 7: Visitor intelligence questions businesses most want answered (multiple answers permitted)

### 4.3 Current Visitor Data Collection Methods

When asked how they currently capture visitor data, attendees described a range of approaches — from manual tracking at visitor booths to website analytics and DMO-provided reports. A subset indicated they receive little or no visitor data at all. Methods mentioned included:

- Visitor booth attendance tracking (spreadsheets, staff notes)
- Booking platform data and postal code collection at point of sale
- Website analytics (Google Analytics) and social media monitoring

- Surveys, polls, and exit survey programs
- DMO-provided data (Discover Muskoka, HMATA)

*Several respondents noted they currently receive “none” or very limited visitor data — pointing to a meaningful gap that geofencing tools could help address.*

#### 4.4 Key Takeaways from the Geofencing Presentation

After the geofencing session, attendees identified their biggest takeaways — with the realization that assumptions may be wrong ranking first:

- Our assumptions about visitors may not always be accurate — 52%
- We need better data before making decisions — 48%
- Data can help with marketing and partnerships — 43%
- Data can help support funding and investment cases — 29%
- Visitors and locals behave differently — 19%

#### 4.5 Most Valuable Geofencing Data Types

Attendees ranked which types of geofencing insights would be most actionable for their businesses. Demographic and visitor profile data topped the list by a wide margin:

##### Most Valuable Geofencing Data Types for Businesses



*Figure 8: Most valuable geofencing data types for tourism businesses (multiple answers permitted)*

#### 4.6 Business Decisions Data Could Improve

Asked what business decisions they could make better with stronger visitor data, attendees named practical operational priorities:

- Hours of operation — multiple respondents mentioned this independently

- Targeted marketing — reaching the right audiences in the right markets
- Staffing levels — aligned to actual visitor traffic patterns
- Package tiering and promotional timing
- Website content in different languages based on visitor origin

## 5. Post-Event Intent

At the close of the event, attendees were asked what actions they are now more likely to take. The response signals strong readiness to act — with no respondents indicating they needed more information before taking a step.

### Actions Attendees Plan to Take After the Event



Figure 9: Post-event actions attendees are more likely to take (multiple answers permitted)

*0% of respondents said they needed more information before taking action — a strong signal that the event content landed with clarity and purpose.*

Attendees also indicated strong interest in content for a proposed weekly 60-second “Tuesday Tip” communication. Events and visitor-facing updates were by far the most requested content type (79%), followed by visitor survey insights (37%) and package and itinerary opportunities (32%).

## 6. Key Themes & Recommended Next Steps

The following six priority actions emerge directly from attendee polling data and open-response feedback. Each is supported by clear evidence from the event and represents a high-confidence opportunity for Explorers' Edge to act on.

### Key Recommendations for Explorers' Edge







-  **Add a Volunteer Award Category**  
Most requested future recognition — every community, every role
-  **Launch AI/Search Readiness Program**  
62% want content audit guidance; 57% want an AI readiness checklist
-  **Expand Geofencing Data Access**  
71% want demographic profiles; 61% focused on off-season traffic growth
-  **Restore Youth Recognition**  
Multiple respondents specifically miss this category
-  **Grow the Event Footprint**  
Attendees want 200+ guests, politicians in the room, stronger promotion
-  **Prioritize Tuesday Tips: Events & Updates**  
79% chose events & visitor-facing updates as most useful content

Figure 10: Summary of key recommendations for Explorers' Edge based on attendee feedback

## Detailed Recommendations

### 1. Launch a Volunteer Award Category

Volunteers were the single most-requested future award category, appearing consistently across all open-response questions. A dedicated volunteer recognition stream — ideally with community-level nominations — would directly respond to attendee priorities and recognize the sector's most cited unsung contributors.

### 2. Develop an AI & Search Readiness Program

62% of attendees want website and content audit guidance, and 57% want an AI search readiness checklist. These two tools together represent the most actionable near-term support Explorers' Edge can provide. A phased program — checklist first, audit guidance second — would serve both immediate and ongoing needs.

### 3. Expand Geofencing Data Access to Partners

71% of attendees want demographic and visitor profile data, and 61% want specific data on how to drive off-season traffic. Geofencing insights should be shared directly with industry partners in an accessible, action-oriented format — not just as raw data, but as practical intelligence tied to business decisions.

### 4. Restore Youth Recognition

Multiple attendees specifically mentioned missing the youth award category. A youth or student recognition mechanism — potentially timed outside the peak summer season — would re-engage this important segment without complicating the streamlined adult awards format.

## 5. Grow the Event Footprint

Attendees expressed clear appetite for a larger event. Specific feedback: 200+ guests, politicians in the room, a longer networking segment, nominee profiles shared in advance, and ecosystem-wide promotion in the weeks leading up to the event. One respondent noted they were surprised more people did not attend — pointing to an outreach gap.

## 6. Prioritize Events & Updates in Weekly Communications

For a proposed weekly 60-second “Tuesday Tip”, 79% of attendees chose events and visitor-facing updates as the most useful content type. This clear mandate should guide content planning for the communications channel.

---

*Source: Slido Event Polling · Big Applause Awards 2026 · Explorers' Edge Regional Tourism Organization · Confidential*