



GroupCollect

WHAT WE HEARD

AT THE INNOVATION STATION
SYTA 2026 | PITTSBURGH, PA

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FORWARD

By Erik Young, Brand Development Manager

Earlier this summer, my colleague Keith Snode wrote an article titled 'The Hidden Intelligence Of Group Travel' and while I encourage everyone to read it, I'll summarize it for the sake of this forward. It explains that every group trip provides a shocking amount of data that could be stored, analyzed, and leveraged to improve future trips but as Keith puts it, "each trip teaches us more than we can remember".

Instead, what usually ends up happening is a few people on staff just "know things" and the data basically lives in their head. But what if companies could harness data easier and truly improve every time they did? These are the proposed benefits of *organizational memory*, and it's a goal that GroupCollect wants to help everyone in group travel achieve.

So as we were filming our 16 sessions at the Innovation Station during SYTA 2026, I couldn't help think about the concept of organizational memory, and how what we were capturing could take it a step further: *this memory could benefit everyone in group travel*.

The entire point of the Innovation Station was to create a permanent record of the insight shared. We didn't want this valuable data to live in the heads of our contributors any longer. Instead, we wanted it to be documented and accessible. We wanted it to be synthesized, analyzed, and internalized so it could affect positive change among tour operators, suppliers, and destinations.

Just as I credited Keith for writing about organizational memory, he must also be credited for conducting the synthesis required to produce the report you're about to read. I'm extremely grateful to work with someone who has the vision to propose such a concept, as well as the drive to lead by example in doing something about it.

I'm also grateful for the entire GroupCollect team whose collective effort in planning and executing the Innovation Station was nothing short of astonishing. And of course none of this would be possible without the wisdom and collaborative spirit of our 45 contributors. They are the embodiment of what makes group travel great: a willingness to share and an insatiable drive to push this industry forward.

We're very proud to present: **What We Heard At The Innovation Station, SYTA 2026.**

SUMMARY

Across five topics and dozens of conversations at Innovation Station, we heard perspectives from tour operators, suppliers, destinations, technology providers, and other group travel professionals. The conversations covered everything from choosing the right partners and sharing information to disconnected technology and what group travel might look like in 2030.

The subjects were different, but as we listened back to the conversations, five ideas continued to surface.

Confidence: Group travel depends on trust. Operators need suppliers they can rely on, suppliers need partners who understand how their businesses work, and travelers need professionals who can turn promises into experiences. Confidence is built through reliability, transparency, communication, and consistently doing what you say you will do.

Connection: No one delivers a group travel experience alone. Relationships allow us to create opportunities, solve problems, and accomplish things that individual organizations often cannot achieve by themselves. And when something goes wrong, those relationships can become part of the infrastructure that keeps the experience, and sometimes the business, moving.

Information: Our industry possesses an extraordinary amount of knowledge, but its value grows when we share it. Destinations know things their supplier partners need to know. Suppliers have information destinations need to represent them effectively. Operators hear things that can help both improve. The opportunity isn't simply to create more information, but to help the right information reach the right people at the right time.

Integration: Much of the friction in group travel happens between things: between organizations, between departments, between systems, and between people who don't always understand how the other works. Technology has helped solve many problems, but disconnected technology can create new ones. Making systems, processes, and information work better together can reduce complexity for everyone.

Adaptation: Group travel will continue to change. AI, new technologies, changing traveler expectations, and new ways of planning and personalizing experiences will reshape how the work gets done. But our conversations suggested that human expertise won't become less important as technology improves. It may become more valuable as people navigate more information, more choices, and more complexity. Taken together, these conversations painted an optimistic picture of an industry with enormous opportunity ahead. But taking advantage of that opportunity will require more than adopting new technology. It will require us to trust one another, strengthen our connections, share what we know, connect what remains disconnected, and remain willing to adapt.

And through all of that change, perhaps one piece of advice from Innovation Station is worth carrying with us:

When something happens, be human.



Become the Supplier Operators Choose

WATCH THE SESSIONS

What makes a tour operator choose one supplier over another and, perhaps more importantly, choose them again?

Across three different conversations, the answer had surprisingly little to do with having the newest product or the lowest price. It came down to confidence. Tour operators are selling experiences they don't directly control. They depend on hotels, attractions, restaurants, transportation companies and other suppliers to deliver what has been promised to their customers. As Brad Rosenbaum from Hemisphere Education Travel stated,

"We don't own or operate anything we do, so our business is in your hands. You are an extension of our service."

That makes reliability incredibly valuable. Operators talked about suppliers who consistently deliver what they promise, communicate changes early and have contingency plans when something goes wrong. They would much rather hear months in advance that something cannot be delivered than discover it shortly before a trip when their options are limited and they are left explaining the change to their customer.

Communication was perhaps the strongest theme of all, but participants made an important distinction: **great communication isn't necessarily more communication. It's the right information at the right time.**

Sometimes that is as simple as acknowledging an RFP so the operator knows it was received. Sometimes it means answering the question they haven't thought to ask yet: Where does the motorcoach drop off? Can the lobby accommodate the entire group? Is there something unusual about the arrival process? And sometimes it means picking up the phone when something goes wrong. As one panelist described it, good communication answers the question being asked; great communication anticipates the next one.

Operators also asked suppliers to understand more about how their businesses work. Rates that arrive too late can make it impossible to confidently price a trip that may be sold a year or more in advance.

Policies and processes designed for transient customers can sometimes create friction when applied to groups. Even operational details such as how a restaurant seats 175 students can have a huge impact on the experience. The details matter.

But there was an important acknowledgment on the other side as well: many operators have never worked inside a hotel, attraction, restaurant or other supplier business and don't fully understand the pressures suppliers face either. The best partnerships begin when both sides become curious about how the other works. Perhaps that is the simplest answer to what makes a supplier one operators choose again and again. Don't overpromise. Don't create surprises. Understand their business. Help them understand yours. Be reachable when it matters. And give them the information they need to confidently represent your product to their customers. The best indication that you've built a strong partnership is when an operator can talk about your product almost as well as you can.

Connect Better: How Operators, Suppliers & Destinations Succeed Together

WATCH THE SESSIONS

Group travel may be made up of individual businesses, but no one delivers the experience alone.

Throughout these sessions, panelists shared examples of what becomes possible when operators, suppliers, and destinations start approaching challenges and opportunities together.

Sometimes collaboration creates something new. When Medieval Times opened its Arizona location in 2019, the timing couldn't have been more difficult. As group travel began recovering from the pandemic, businesses throughout the market worked together to bring groups back to the area rather than protecting opportunities for themselves. The result was a stronger recovery that benefited everyone.

In another example, a relationship formed through SYTA led the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum and Dance the Magic to combine their expertise and begin development of a dance program connected to the legacy of June Carter Cash. Neither organization would have created quite the same experience on its own.

But some of the most powerful stories weren't about creating new opportunities. They were about what happens when things don't go as planned. Participants remembered flight cancellations this past spring that required calls to trusted partners at all hours of the day and night, the aftermath of September 11th, and the extraordinary challenges of the pandemic. Again and again, relationships made the difference. When established processes weren't enough, people who knew and trusted each other could pick up the phone, have an honest conversation, and work toward a solution together.

In those moments, relationships weren't simply good for business; they became part of the infrastructure that kept the businesses moving.

So what would it take for group travel to operate more like a connected community? Panelists repeatedly returned to communication and transparency, but the conversation went deeper than simply communicating more.

It meant bringing tour directors and managers further into the planning process so they have the information necessary to deliver the experience on the road. It meant being clearer about expectations with travelers. It meant recognizing that every partner in the ecosystem has responsibilities and pressures that may not always be visible to everyone else.

It also meant being more willing to share. Several panelists challenged the tendency to protect information, relationships, and ideas as competitive advantages. **Their experience suggested that when trusted partners share knowledge, make introductions, and solve problems together, the opportunity grows.**

The panelists also felt technology, including AI, will make connecting and exchanging information easier. But they were equally clear about something they don't want the industry to lose along the way: our human connection. Some of the strongest industry partnerships began because two people met, talked, listened, and discovered something they could accomplish better together. When circumstances became difficult, those same relationships gave them someone they could call.

The opportunity ahead isn't only to make more connections but to excel at using those connections to create better outcomes for everyone.

Share Better. Grow Together. How Destinations & Suppliers Win Together

WATCH THE SESSIONS

What happens when destinations and their supplier partners stop thinking about information as something they own and start thinking about it as something they can use together?

Across conversations featuring representatives from New York City, Orlando, and the Cincinnati region, we heard that some of the most valuable destination partnerships are built around a surprisingly simple practice: keeping each other informed.

Destinations often have access to information an individual supplier may not. Market research and performance data can help a supplier understand whether changes in their own business reflect a larger trend. Convention calendars can help them anticipate demand. Feedback from tour operators can reveal opportunities for improvement they might otherwise never hear. And regular communication about what is happening across a destination can help individual businesses make better decisions. But that exchange has to work in both directions.

Destination organizations can't effectively represent products they don't know about. Suppliers need to keep their destination partners informed about new experiences, changing services, group offerings, and other developments, and give them opportunities to experience the product firsthand. As several panelists pointed out, destination sales teams may train thousands of travel advisors and tour operators, participate in sales missions, host FAM tours, and represent their members in markets those members may never reach on their own.

One panelist described the destination organization as an extension of the supplier's sales team. If that's the case, suppliers have a responsibility to make sure that team has what it needs to sell. **The better information flows in both directions, the more valuable both partners become to each other.**

Panelists also shared examples of what happens when that exchange grows into active collaboration. NYC Tourism + Conventions can create large-scale marketing campaigns that individual suppliers could never afford to undertake independently. Destinations can organize sales missions that give suppliers meaningful time with prospective customers.

FAM tours and training events bring buyers directly into member businesses. And when a new attraction opens, destination partners and neighboring suppliers can help identify how that new experience fits into the larger destination story.

Collaboration can even change how suppliers see one another. Several panelists challenged the assumption that businesses offering similar experiences must always behave as competitors. Talking with other attractions, venues, and suppliers can reveal best practices, generate new ideas, and create opportunities for referrals. There can be value in making the entire destination easier to understand and buy rather than focusing exclusively on an individual business.

And that may be where the greatest opportunity lies. Tour operators don't experience a destination as a collection of membership organizations and independent businesses. They are trying to build an itinerary. When the destination and its partners are informed, aligned, and working together, that job becomes easier. Sharing better doesn't simply help destinations and suppliers sell each other. It helps them sell the destination together.



Behind the Scenes: How Group Travel Suppliers Really Work

WATCH THE SESSIONS

From the outside, booking a group experience can look relatively simple. Behind the scenes, the systems and processes required to deliver that experience can be anything but.

Our panelists represented very different businesses, from attractions and performing arts organizations to destination organizations, hospitality companies, dining services, and financial technology. Their technology ranged from sophisticated reservation platforms and CRMs to Microsoft applications and manual processes. But nearly everyone was trying to solve some version of the same challenge: how do we manage all of the complexity behind the scenes while making the experience as simple as possible for our customers?

Technology is increasingly essential to doing that well. Panelists talked about using CRM systems to manage relationships, leads and contracts, reservation systems to improve booking and availability, and digital payment solutions to replace cash. One panelist put the goal simply: make payment easy, make availability easy to see, and make the entire process as seamless as possible. But technology can create challenges of its own.

Systems don't always communicate with one another. A CRM that doesn't connect with a point-of-sale system can require duplicate data entry and introduce opportunities for error. Ticketing platforms may not connect easily with distribution partners. New products can take months to configure. And when suppliers serve different customer types, the technology selected for the larger organization doesn't always match the needs of the group sales team.

Even businesses that have invested significantly in technology haven't necessarily eliminated manual processes. One panelist described an industry where more than 40 Broadway theaters operate across numerous ticketing systems, creating complexity that ultimately has to be managed on behalf of the customer. Another shared that paper vouchers are still sometimes part of their process. The challenge isn't simply adopting more technology. It's getting the technology we already use to work together.

Panelists also emphasized that selecting technology isn't only about functionality. Implementation, support and a technology partner's willingness to continue evolving matter. And no matter how good the technology becomes, contingency plans remain essential for those moments when it doesn't work.

Perhaps the most revealing part of the conversation, however, came when we asked what tour operators might be surprised to learn about how suppliers work. The answers had very little to do with technology.

We heard about small teams balancing sales responsibilities with conducting tours, facilitating programs and traveling on behalf of their organizations. We heard about people making themselves available nights and weekends because they don't want a group to have a poor experience. We heard about suppliers changing their booking processes because they listened to operator feedback. And we heard people talk about their products not simply as something they sell, but as experiences they genuinely care about sharing.

That creates an interesting paradox for group travel. We need technology to remove friction, connect systems and make increasingly complicated businesses easier to manage. But the goal isn't to remove the people. The best technology handles more of the complexity behind the scenes so the people can spend more of their time creating better experiences.



Prepare for What's Next: Group Travel in 2030

WATCH THE SESSIONS

What will group travel look like in 2030? If our panelists were right, plenty will change. How we plan travel, how businesses operate, how customers find information, and even how experiences are personalized will continue to evolve. Artificial intelligence will play an increasingly important role in that transformation. But perhaps the more interesting question isn't what will change. It's what won't.

Panelists consistently viewed AI as a tool that can enhance the work people do rather than simply replace it. Travelers, educators and group leaders will have access to more information and more planning tools than ever before. That means some may question whether they still need travel professionals at all. The panelists believed that makes demonstrating the value of professional expertise even more important.

Information can help someone identify a museum. Experience tells you how to get 200 students off four motorcoaches, through the entrance, and into that museum successfully. Technology can generate possibilities, but experienced travel professionals understand the countless details that turn those possibilities into experiences that actually work. And when something doesn't go according to plan, trust, relationships and firsthand knowledge become even more valuable.

At the same time, technology may allow group travel to become much more personalized. Instead of every group, or even every traveler within a group, having exactly the same experience, better information and technology could make it easier to tailor experiences to different interests and needs.

The destinations travelers choose may change as well. Panelists expect continued growth in travel to create opportunities beyond the places that have traditionally attracted the largest numbers of visitors. Concerns about overtourism, increasing costs, and greater awareness of alternatives could bring more attention to regional and secondary destinations. Social media helped concentrate demand by repeatedly showing travelers the same places and experiences, and some panelists questioned whether AI recommendations could reinforce that same pattern.

That creates an opportunity for travel professionals to help people look beyond the obvious choice and ask a more important question: What experience are you actually trying to create?

Preparing for 2030, however, isn't something the industry can wait until 2030 to do. Panelists encouraged organizations to begin getting their data in order now, particularly when important information currently lives across multiple systems. They encouraged thoughtful and transparent experimentation with AI, including establishing guidelines for how it should be used. They talked about sharing knowledge more freely and continuing to listen closely to customers, not simply for the solutions customers request, but for the underlying problems they are trying to solve. And they stressed education. **As technology evolves, everyone in the industry will need opportunities to understand it, experiment with it, and determine where it genuinely makes their work better.**

For all the discussion about change, however, there was remarkable optimism about what comes next. This is an industry that has adapted through September 11th, a global pandemic, and countless other disruptions. It will adapt again. Because even in 2030, people will still want to go somewhere together. They will still want to experience something they couldn't experience at home. And when circumstances change or something goes wrong, they will still need people who know what to do.

The tools will change. The expectations will change. The way we work will change. **Our challenge is to embrace what technology makes possible without losing the human experience that makes travel worth doing in the first place.**



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