

GIANTS Stadium at
Sydney Showground.
Photo credit:
Ondřej Koucky,
Rapturous Media.



THE CREATIVE POWER OF THE MEGA VENUE

Mega venues offer size and scope, with facilities that can draw delegate numbers that dwarf typical venues. But it's not the size that makes them particularly attractive to event organisers. Rather, it's what you can do with them, **Matthew Sainsbury** reports.

Mega venues – and the kinds of events that use them – have been resurgent over the past few years. This has everything to do with the unique and memorable experiences that event organisers can create using the space.

In fact, the sheer volume of the demand for getting back to events has surprised us all. Whether it's consumers at a sporting event, music concert or expo, or delegates at industry events, the sense of connection and community that events provide is core to us as humans and we couldn't wait to get back to them.

"I personally thought it would be a two or three-year burn back to the numbers we were doing in, say, 2019, which was a record year for Sydney Showground," Sydney Showground general manager, Darryl Jeffrey, says. "But this financial year, we will surpass what we did in 2019 as a record year by another 10 per cent. It's been staggering just how quickly things have returned."

"People realised during COVID-19 that we take some experiences for granted, and that these can be taken away, so now, when the opportunity comes to do something special, they want to make sure they don't miss out."

Limitless creativity, endless possibility

The key then, is to make sure that the event is an experience that is distinctive and memorable.

Village Roadshow Theme Parks, head of conferences and events, Caroline Duveau-Clayton, says, that in her 16 years with the company, she hasn't done a single event twice in the same way. This speaks to the real advantage of mega venues. The size of the facilities isn't just about fitting more people into the room – it also enables the event organisers to get creative without limitations.

"We have our own show and entertainment department to develop events from scratch," Duveau-Clayton says. "We've got our own wardrobe team to create costumes and enhance shows. We also have teams of entertainment people and specialists to help on the ground and take the experience to the next level."

People often think about "mega venues" in terms of scale for large events, but that level of customisation and pizzazz also allows for the most memorable small-scale events, Duveau-Clayton adds.

"Imagine beautiful tables and floating candles down the Main Street of Movie World for a gala dinner for just 50 people. It won't feel out of place," she said. "The flexibility is endless with what we can do in these spaces."

Mega venues afford organisers scope that goes beyond the facilities and flows through to the menus and catering. As with all exhibition spaces, fully customised menus are available, but mega venues have access to other options that can add a fun and playful twist to a memorable experience.

"Food trucks are extremely popular at the moment," Duveau-Clayton says. "They're a big part of our park experiences, and many of our organisers do something like a traditional plated awards dinner for the main course, but then open up the churros and ice cream carts for dessert. Delegates absolutely love that. Add in some rides and people are taking full advantage of the theme park setting and linking it to their event's themes."

ESG outcomes are key

Another key item for event organisers is being able to demonstrate environmental, social and governance (ESG) outcomes, Jeffrey adds. Organisers of events of all sizes have ESG outcomes as a reportable item, and so they look to their venue partners to provide experiences that address that.

"It's not just about the lowest price – in fact, it's never the main priority now," Jeffrey says. "Delegates and organisers alike want to know that what they're doing and the money they're spending in the venue is being used the right way. For example, a lot of our customers want to know about our First Nations purchasing practices and having indigenous ingredients in our menus and the like. We've certainly been very active in that space in terms of our ESG practices. ▶"



Mega venues



Above: Sydney Royal Easter Show 2023. Photo credit: MONDE Photo for RAS of NSW.

Top right: Glitz and glam at Warner Bros. Movie World.

Below: Dining under the stars at Warner Bros. Movie World.

“Another area where we’ve been pushing hard is sustainability. We recently upgraded the lighting and air conditioning across the venue and measured the impact across the Easter Show. Over the two-year period, we dropped our carbon emissions by 70 tonnes in the first year and then 50 tonnes in the second year. That’s a total of 120 tonnes over two years, and the equivalent of charging 1.4 million smartphones. These are the kinds of reportable ESG initiatives that organisers are looking for.”

The support of true expertise

Those that run mega venues are typically involved in putting on very large events of their own, and there are specific challenges that come along with managing events of such great scale. That makes mega venue teams an especially useful resource for organisers in planning their own events and addressing the challenges that may arise.

For example, The Royal Agricultural Society (RAS), which operates Sydney Showground, has in-house experience of staging the Royal Easter Show each year. That event is one of the world’s largest

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consumer shows, and in running that event, the RAS keeps itself well informed of key trends and challenges facing its event organiser partners.

Thanks to that direct experience, Sydney Showground also knows where its venue experiences can be enhanced by outsourcing. For example, a short while before COVID, the company went from managing AV internally to outsourcing it to a specialist (Harry the Hirer), which improved the AV experience across the board, Jeffrey says.

“We don’t pretend to be experts in audio-visual,” Jeffrey says. “Things move so quickly with AV, and unless you’re breathing it, day in and day out, it’s hard to remain relevant in that area. So that’s why we outsource to people that do live and breathe it. We find that a better model and our clients are very appreciative of that as well.”

At a time when scrutiny of outcomes is high, event organisers need to be creative and ensure that their events are memorable occasions on the calendar. When it comes to delivering a premium experience that delegates won’t want to miss, the massively customisable nature of mega venue spaces, backed by the scale of resources that the management organisations have available to them, makes the scope of any given event limited only by the imagination. ■

