

Event industry head pulling rabbits out of hats

By [Nicole Chamberlin](#)

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As an internationally renowned events director who's put on events for up to 60,000 people, Maria Steyn is now spearheading a business called Salute. With two decades' experience in the industry from South Africa to Nigeria, The DRC to Zimbabwe /Botswana, and Dubai to Abu Dhabi among others, she's got a hands-on approach from ideation and conceptualisation right to the event finish line.



Maria Steyn

She's an accomplished individual who seems to have been born to succeed. With a strong focus on out-there creative, she's got a handle on everything from suppliers and logistics to hospitality and accreditation as well catering and security. She brings her cool demeanor and ability to pull the proverbial 'rabbit out of a hat' to the Salute fold, a business that offers comprehensive bar- and events management support and infrastructure to all tiers of events.

Steyn's business prowess was recognised by the trio driving Cascade holdings, who chose to have her head up one of its business divisions, as she's known for pulling rabbits out of hats. With world economies in lockdown, even the disrupters have become disrupted. Falls true with the event industry too.

What are a few of the lessons from the pandemic that are reimagining the event industry?

Post-pandemic etiquette at events.

Come the aftermath of the pandemic - do you feel SA will truly event again? And how?

Absolutely! I don't think it's a question of if, it's a question of when. It's going to come back in full force when it does. Why - because people have and will always want to be at events. Having endured over months of isolation and restrictions people are frothing to be together with friends to celebrate.

It could prove trickier with some guests attending in the flesh, others virtually - what are your thoughts on this hybrid model?

The world was moving more and more into the virtual and hybrid events space but Covid-19 has pushed the industry in this direction faster than expected. Virtual events have certainly provided a lifeline for many through this pandemic. I think there's huge scope for this hybrid model that combines elements of a physical and virtual event and is delivered in one unified experience.

Some key benefits will be:

Those who choose not to be vaccinated may face limitations in terms of attending actual events

Those that still do not feel comfortable being at in-person events still have the ability to be a part of them

Capacity limitations can be mitigated by having virtual attendees

Post pandemic budgets will probably be tighter and actual event costs will be reduced due to fewer attendees

What are the critical success factors for managing the visitor experience at a major event, especially while adhering to strict social distancing and Covid-19 protocols?

Everyone will have different levels of comfort and desire to travel as the world reopens. Clearly articulating the health and safety protocols at your event will be critical to increasing attendance over the next few years.

Key will be working closely with event partners to secure the event ecosystem and being clear of your policies about non-compliance. But I imagine going forward, because at this stage with no major events have taken place, that the following factors would be of key importance:

Making sure guests attending a major event have proof of either vaccination or a negative Covid-19 test

Rapid on-site testing before entry as an alternative

Ensuring that all Covid-19 protocols continue to be followed, especially wearing masks and sanitizing

Strict cleaning and sanitising protocols in bathrooms, bars, and food areas

Ideally, all staff working should only be allowed to work with proof of a negative Covid-19 test result

Are enough SA women getting a chance to shine in their industry and shatter that oft-

referenced glass ceiling?

In my experience, that glass ceiling is pretty much a thing of the past. The majority of key industry players that I deal with in the events industry (clients and suppliers) are in fact women, so in my opinion, women are shining!

List a few of the specific challenges females face in the workplace? And how did you overcome them?

In all honesty, they've been minimal. Having started in this industry about 16 years ago, I've had to work very hard to get to where I am today. My approach has always been on working hard and working smart. Everything I do, I do without the fear of failure, which already makes things far simpler from the onset.

You pride yourself in promoting women in business - how?

I pride myself in working with the best, at the best price. Women have done the promoting themselves, as they hold most of the key roles in our industry today. In my direct space - I have always given a woman and a man the same chances and opportunities.

As a female business leader, what's the most stressful and enjoyable aspect of your workday?

Balance is undoubtedly the most stressful element of my workday. On a day-to-day basis, challenges are what I love the most as I'm constantly learning. Each event we quote or work on is different from the next which keeps me on my toes.

For example, when we do Ultra Music Festival, it's the fact that there were no glitches and all guests arrived home safely, despite the volume of planning, effort, and time that went into creating the event. And that sense of achievement is incredibly rewarding.

How can we ensure the next generation results in more empowered females and better gender representation in the creative industries?!

Keep doing what you're doing ladies - this industry is ours for the taking.

Who's your current female work inspiration – both an older mentor and a youngster who's attracting the spotlight.

When it comes to a mentor - Desti Loeijs. When I started in the event industry, she hired me as a runner and driver on her big stadium shows. I then spent about 12 years working under her wing. Everything I am today, and everything I have learned and achieved, can be greatly attributed to her!

Right under our very own roof at Salute is a youngster attracting the spotlight - Kat Sharman. This woman is capable of anything - continuing to grow from strength to strength. I know we'll see great things from her.

What do you see as the event industry trends for 2022 and beyond?

Twenty-twenty-two is going to hit us hard - it'll be exciting to see the volume of virtual and hybrid events as people are hungry to get back to life as we knew it.

With iconic event venues such as the Ticketpro Dome in JHB closing down, where do you see these mass indoor events being held?

Some of my fondest event memories were made in this venue, and this was such sad news for the industry as a whole. These types of venues catered to so many different types of events and this is a huge loss. At the end of the day, change is not always a bad thing - I am sure we will see new venues popping up post-pandemic, that will give the industry a fresh platform with which to work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a corporate communications specialist, Nicole Chamberlin is fascinated by the power of words and how they influence world views and public opinion.

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