

Hiring the Right PA System for Your Sydney Event

Know what you need, where to get it, how much to pay and more...

Is hiring a PA in Sydney any different to anywhere else? Mostly not, but compared to other Australian cities and other countries, the conventions and pricing may vary. This article is intended to give some city specific advice for those organizing events here in Sydney.

So What Type of PA System Do I Need?

There's four main things to work out first:

- Application
- Power Requirements
- Quality and
- Environment

Application (What's the PA For?)

Different application specific systems might include:

- **Vocal PA.** This type of system is designed primarily for amplifying speech and perhaps some background music. This is probably the simplest type of PA. It may include as little as a microphone and powered speaker. Power requirements are modest.



Vocal PA system with a powered speaker.

- **Foreground Dance Music and Speech PA.** This type of PA may require sub speakers designed to handle bass frequencies. The power requirements increase quite a bit from a vocal PA.



Dance music PA system with 12" main speakers & a single sub speaker.

- **Live Music PA.** This is the most complicated system. It may also require multiple microphones, direct input devices (DI boxes), foldback monitors (so singers can hear themselves), a mixer with foldback sends, processors such as compressors, limiters and special effects. Power requirements increase dramatically especially for live music with drums and bass guitar.



Band PA system with a 12" main speakers, 2 sub speakers, 2 foldback speakers, mixer & amplifier.

Power Requirements

Amplifiers and speakers are normally rated in watts (RMS not Peak). It's often useful to work out the power requirement in watts-per-person in the audience.

Application	Watts-Per-Person Indoor	Watts-Per-Person Outdoor
Vocal	1	1.5
Dance Music	2	3
Live Music (soloist or duo)	2	3
Live Music (band with drums and bass)	5	7

Quality

With PA equipment quality generally relates to performance and reliability. The quality of equipment you need really depends on your application. If the system is for say home use at a party then you may not need to be as fussy as if it was for a large event with paying customers. The main question to ask is – if this equipment failed or sounded poor, what’s the worst that could happen? If the application is critical, then it may be worth considering a backup plan which includes having some extra stand-by equipment.

Most hire companies have reasonably good quality equipment. The budget equipment tends not to last well in a challenging hire environment. When purchasing PA equipment there’s a big difference in price between quality brands and budget brands but this is not as true for hire prices.

Environment

This is something often overlooked. The acoustical properties of a room can have a dramatic effect on the performance of a PA system. In a highly reverberant (echo prone) room you may want to consider speakers with narrow dispersion or a distributed speaker system. For a particularly wide or large room you may consider multiple front of house speakers.

An outdoor PA system doesn’t have the above problems but can require significantly more power as the sound is able dissipate easily. Weather conditions may also be a factor. Most PA equipment is not waterproof and electrical hazards can exist in wet conditions.

Dry Hire or Production Hire

There are basically two types of hire. **Dry Hire** (or **Driveway Hire**) is where a customer picks up and operates the equipment themselves. **Production Hire** is where the supplier delivers, sets up and usually operates the equipment. Dry Hire is the most popular option.

Dry Hire Advantages

- Usually lowest cost.
- Very flexible (can hire equipment at short notice and use it anytime during the hire period).

Dry Hire Disadvantages

- The user is responsible for working out exactly what they need for their event although the hire company will normally be happy to give some guidance.

- The user needs to organize, pick-up, transport, set-up, operate and return the equipment.
- The user may not have access to an experienced operator.

Production Hire Advantages

- Includes an experienced operator using a familiar standard system.
- Dry Hire companies need to allow for damage or loss from inexperienced, careless or dishonest customers. Production Hire companies however look after the equipment themselves while in use and therefore may offer a discount or better grade equipment.

Production Hire Disadvantages

- Generally higher cost since it includes an operator as well.
- Less flexibility (have to book in specific dates and times in advance)

How Much Should I Pay?

Application	Dry Hire	Production Hire
Vocal PA (100 people)	\$100	\$300
Dance Music PA (with sub speaker for 100 people)	\$150	\$275
Live Music PA (soloist or duo, with foldback, 100 people)	\$200	300
Live Music PA (band with drums and bass, with sub speaker, 200 people)	\$350	\$400

Whilst reasonable sized PA systems are supplied without sub speakers, in my opinion they don't quite deliver the same quality of sound for dance music or live music with drums and bass. You can see that as live music systems start to get larger production hire starts to become more cost competitive.

Where Can I Hire PA Equipment?

Around Sydney there are plenty of places to hire PA equipment for your event. Different sources include:

Supplier	Comments
Party Hire Companies	Some of these also supply PA equipment. Can be a convenient one-stop shop but no specialist knowledge and limited range. Good if they have the right equipment and you know what you need for a small event. Almost every suburb in Sydney would have one of these companies.
General Hire Companies (E.g. Kennards)	Even less specialist knowledge and range but again might be convenient for a small event.

DJ Equipment Retailers	A number of these do hire as well. Better range, reasonable knowledge. Not specifically PA providers but good for small events like parties. Usually well priced. Often do party/dance lighting too.
Specialist PA Hire Companies	Excellent product knowledge and range. Usually cost a little more but equipment is good quality. Many of these companies also do production hire and lighting hire.
Small Independent PA Operators	Mostly do production hire. Usually good quality equipment and experienced operators. Cheaper than dry hire + paying a separate operator. You'd have to look at each supplier's reputation & their list of recent events.
Large Event Production Companies (E.g. Staging Connections, Norwest, Jands)	If you use these companies you're pretty much guaranteed the absolute best equipment and operators. For small events this can be very expensive but for larger events the per-head cost is more reasonable.

Geographically there's more of the specialist PA and DJ hire companies in Sydney's inner suburbs especially around Parramatta Rd. If you're in the far North or North West like Hornsby or The Hills District your choice is a bit more limited. Of course the general equipment hire and party hire companies are found in just about every suburb.

Equipment Pickup and Return Considerations

Picking up equipment sounds simple but there's a few factors to consider.

- Opening Hours. Most hire companies are open Monday to Friday and part or all of Saturday. Some close around 1PM. I'm not aware of any open Sunday though there could be some.
- If you're picking up equipment for a Saturday or Sunday event remember that Saturday morning a peak time for most hire companies so allow extra time.
- If transporting equipment in your car it may be worth throwing in some towels or blankets as packing to prevent your car getting damaged.
- Equipment can be heavy so for safety secure this well in your car. Seatbelts can be useful for this.
- Sunday Hire. The convention is that if you pick up on a Saturday and the company is not open on a Sunday, then you just pay for the one day.
- Multiple day hire. Often a discount of up to 50% is given for extra days of hire.
- Equipment Return. Returning equipment on a weekday can be a problem if you work normal business hours so perhaps plan for someone else to return. Always check the agreement to see what time equipment is due back else late fees may apply.

Checklist for Typical PA Applications

Vocal PA System for 100 People	
	1 x Microphone
	1 x Microphone Stand
	2 x Microphone Cable (1 as spare)
	1 x Lectern or music stand
	2 x Powered Speakers (min 10", min 150 watts each)
	1 x mixer with (min 1 x XLR microphone input + 1 jack input for iPod or CD)
	1 x iPod cable
	1 x CD Player
	2 x Speaker signal cables (check they match the mixer)
Dance Music PA System for 100 People	
	1 x Microphone
	2 x Microphone Cables (1 as spare)
	2 x Powered Speakers (min 12 min 250 watts each)
	2 x Powered sub speaker (min 200 watts each)
	2 speaker stands
	4 x Speaker signal cables (check they match the mixer)
	1 x iPod cable
	1 x passive mixer with (min 1 x XLR input + 1 jack input for iPod or CD) OR 1 x dedicated DJ mixer (more suited to transitioning between musical tracks)
Band PA System for 4 Piece Rock Band for 200 people	
	3 x Dynamic vocal microphones
	2 x Dynamic instrument microphones
	1 x Kick drum microphone
	3 x vocal microphone stands
	3 x short instrument microphone stands
	10 x microphone leads
	2 x passive foldback speakers (min 12", min 200 watts)
	2 x passive speakers (min 12", min 300 watts)
	2 x powered sub speakers (min 12", min 200 watts) + signal cables
	1 x amplifier (for main speakers, min 400 watts per channel)
	1 x amplifier (for foldback speakers, min 250 watts per channel)
	4 x speaker leads
	1 x 8 channel passive mixer
	1 x stereo compressor/limiter + patch leads
	1 x reverb unit (unless mixer has on-board effects) + patch leads
	1 x stereo 31 band graphic equalizer + patch leads
	1 x 12 way multicore cable
	1 x iPod lead
	1 x CD player

I hope this report has enabled you to go out and find the right PA and have a successful, stress free event.

Lee Wright
Sydney PA Hire