

# Marcus Aims To Build Biggest Fish In Aquarium Sea

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution  
Published on: 05/31/05

Size, it seems, sells when it comes to fish tanks.

As Atlanta gets ready to unveil the still-under-construction Georgia Aquarium, the 76-year-old billionaire behind the project, chamber of commerce types and even competitors are poised to pronounce the facility the biggest indoor aquarium in the United States, and one of the biggest on the planet.

In the land of McMansions and "monster" burgers, marketing gurus say, bigger is better.

"We always like to say bigger, better, best," said Jill Allread of Public Communications Inc., which markets Chicago's Shedd Aquarium. The Shedd currently bills itself as the nation's largest indoor aquarium. "In a competitive market, anything that cuts you away from the others is always an advantage."

And the aquarium world has gotten a lot more competitive. The number of accredited aquariums jumped about 50 percent, to 36, during the past decade as cities from Denver to Camden, N.J., looked to the aquatic showpieces to entice visitors.

The ship-shaped Georgia Aquarium, set to open Nov. 23, will dwarf the nearby Tennessee Aquarium, outsize the world-class Monterey Aquarium in California and even one-up the venerable Shedd Aquarium, the nation's oldest.

Home Depot co-founder Bernie Marcus, the man who dreamed up the world's largest hardware stores and is now spending \$200 million of his personal fortune on the facility, has kept many of the aquarium's details under wraps. However, paperwork filed by aquarium officials with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reveals a prevalent "bigger is better" theme.

One chart carries the heading "More Water, More Fish, More Fun" and shows the Georgia Aquarium topping 10 other U.S. aquariums in volume of water — a key measure of an aquarium's size. Its tanks will hold more than 5 million gallons of salt and fresh water, trailed by about 4.7 million for the Shedd.

Another chart in the NOAA paperwork shows the Atlanta facility with 55,000 fish and other animals, compared with about 11,500 for the award-winning National Aquarium in Baltimore.

"When I started interviewing aquarium people, they all came to me with the same thing — we're going to open this nice little aquarium, it's going to be cute, something similar to New Orleans or Chattanooga," Marcus said in a recent interview. "But I said, 'You don't understand what I'm trying to do here. I want something extraordinary. I want something unique.' "

There's likely to be a few big show-stoppers like hammerhead sharks and large octopuses — one of Marcus' favorites. But he doesn't want just one or two specimens of most other fish. For example, paperwork filed with the state Department of Resources indicates that Marcus hopes to lure as many as 5,000 French grunts, 4,000 yellow tail, 3,000 mullet and a whopping 10,000 scad.

Those numbers could give the Georgia Aquarium a fin up when it comes to luring tourists.

The facility, which overlooks Centennial Olympic Park in downtown Atlanta, hopes to attract more than 2 million visitors its first year.

"Even if I've seen an aquarium, perhaps I haven't see the largest one," said Rajiv Grover, head of the marketing department at the University of Georgia's Terry College of Business. "In marketing, you have to give people a reason to buy the product."

Deb Fassnacht, executive vice president of the Shedd, said the Chicago facility's current designation of largest indoor aquarium is not the only reason people come to the facility. The Shedd prides itself on the variety of its exhibits, boasting 1,600 species. The Atlanta facility is expected to have about 500 species.

"Chicago loves to say biggest and best," Fassnacht said. "But ultimately, people come because the product is good."

Superlatives alone don't guarantee success, she said. And they can have a dark side.

"If you use superlatives and you don't deliver on the promise, that can backfire," she warned.

Ken Peterson, public relations manager for the Monterey Bay Aquarium, said his facility intentionally has avoided most superlatives.

"We steer clear of any references to biggest or anything like that because there are so many ways to slice that pie — square footage, acres, gallons of water, numbers of species, numbers of individual animals," Peterson said. "We've tried to stay with quality. People generally think of us as the best aquarium in the United States."

One of the problems, he said, is that "biggest" is often in the eye of the fish-holder.

"We used to claim a quarter of a million animals in our collection," he said. "But that was counting every coral polyp and every little tube worm. It was ludicrous to do that."

Monterey, he said, has concentrated on quality exhibits that "wow" visitors.

"Are they impressed? Are there literally 'Wows' as they walk through the building that they tell there friends about?"

Still, Peterson said, being able to say you're the biggest has its advantages.

"The world's largest aquarium, the nation's largest aquarium — sure, it's a good marketing hook," he said.

Allread, meanwhile, said that if the Atlanta facility does prove to be the nation's biggest indoor aquarium when it opens its doors, the Shedd will have to back away from its claim.

"They will always be able to say they are the largest aquarium on the Great Lakes," she said. "You can always find some distinguishing factor."