



SUSAN TIBBLES For The Times

Grabbed bags

Hollywood loves freebies, but as down-listers swipe swag, the givers revolt.

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Special to The Times

LIKE the storied clashes of the Trojan War, the infamous scrum over gift bags at a Shay Todd fashion show in 2003 has grown over the year into a mythic tale of good versus evil.

Fact: Angeleno magazine editor-at-large Amanda Luttrell Garrigus was perched in the front row at Smashbox Studios. Fact: A gutsy fashion stylist accused Garrigus of stealing her seat and, much more insidious, the favor-filled gift bag that producers had placed on it.

But, despite gleeful eyewitness accounts to the contrary, punches were not thrown. "I didn't get

swung at," Garrigus recalls. "But the stylist came up to me and said, very aggressively, 'You're sitting in my seat, and you're stealing my gift bag.' She wanted to start a fight."

The gifting trend in Los Angeles has gotten ugly.

The concept of fabulous freebies — for famous and non-famous alike — has exploded over the last three years, and with it has come a passionate sense of entitlement to those swag sacks that industry event planners hand out: totes stuffed with beauty products, electronics, jewelry, spa vouchers and crystal-*[See Gift bags, Page E18]*

Are you a somebody? It's in the gift bag

[Gift bags, from Page E1]
studded panties.

Designers have watched in shock as fashion-show attendees jump over catwalks to steal \$250 sunglasses meant for celebrity VIPs. One woman sometimes poses as a magazine style editor and sneaks into gift lounges intended for awards-show presenters. Savvy attendees at most commercially sponsored bashes think nothing of sniffing out the party-favor storage room and snatching a swag bag — or four — before anyone even gets the chance to offer.

The accessory acquisition madness isn't limited to nobodies. Models and actresses have been known to demand their gift bags after red-carpet events — and sometimes extras for husbands or friends.

Why such ardor over free stuff? Partly it's the ever-increasing price tag of the goods. But more important, some gifters say, Angelinos associate freebies with status.

"If they can get you to give them product," fashion publicist Cindy Srednicki of Vision PR says, "then they've reached the level they think they belong on. People will say or do anything."

But the freebies work to the benefit of the companies supplying them only if their products are seen on actual celebrities. A fabulous Hogan purse spotted on Jessica Simpson can go a long way toward increasing sales and brand prestige. That same purse in the hands of a personal assistant, however, has zero cachet.

Fighting back

THE cupidry has gotten so bad that professional gifters — the companies that have sprung up in recent years to set up gift lounges and bags and \$110,000 Oscar baskets — are starting to fight back.

Backstage security has doubled at most awards shows. Gift-bag planners, on guard against theft by entourage members, assistants, managers and the like, are making grantees sign receipts so elaborate they look like film contracts. And even fledgling clothing designers, traditionally expected to offer free garments to fashion editors and celebrities in exchange for exposure, have begun to cut back — with mixed success.

"Sav no to a stvle editor and

your chances are 50-50 that she'll understand," says Meghan Fabulous, a local 27-year-old designer whose plastic purses and colorful dashikis have attracted buyers such as Pink and Angelina Jolie.

They either respect you or they get mad, Fabulous says. "They'll say, 'Who is she to not give me the product?' The celebrity publicists do that too."

Other fashion publicists, such as Underglam and Blue Cult representative Liz Dennery Marks, have decided to cultivate just a few long-term celebrity relationships for each client — say, Courteney Cox and Heather Locklear — instead of throwing gifts at dozens of hot young things. And when Dennery Marks does send gifts, she avoids celebrity publicists, whose offices have gained notoriety for swallowing freebies en masse, like miniature black holes.

Instead, she goes through personal assistants or on-set wardrobe gurus, or delivers gifts directly to stars' homes.

"Gifting is getting very dangerous," Dennery Marks says. "There are publicists out there who might not be as savvy, or companies that get the wool pulled over their eyes, thinking they are going to reach this person or that person, but there's no guarantee. It's a total roulette game."

Even when the goods get into the hands of the desired celebs, there's no guarantee they'll stay there. After picking up a \$10,000 bag stuffed with customized jeans and Judith Ripka diamonds at October's L.A. Fashion Week, actress Sela Ward told *The Times* she loved the gifts and couldn't wait to wear them. But her husband, Howard Sherman, hinted that other swag often doesn't stay around long: "Our housekeeper would quit," he said, "if we didn't bring home the goodie bags."

Fashion publicists and others in the gifting business agree that the most egregious hoarding started about two or three years ago. Before then, the concept of awards-show gift lounges or five-figure gift baskets was an obscure one to most Americans, with the annual Oscar baskets being a notable exception.

But, as the new millennium dawned, so did a fresh national obsession with celebrities, fueled by new glossies like *In Touch* and



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KNOWING HOW TO GIVE: Karen Wood, president of Backstage Creations, says, "Now, there's an avalanche of gifting."

the rebirth of standbys like *Us Weekly* and *The Star*. With that dubious renaissance came a renewed interest in everything celebrities ate, dressed, thought, wore and received as gifts.

Marketers took notice. Why spend \$60,000 for a print ad in a fashion magazine when a company can spend \$5,000 for a spot in a celebrity gift bag and enjoy tons of free press?

Valuable freebies

THE free baubles started to fly. The Academy Awards gift basket for presenters or winners skyrocketed in value, from \$20,000 in 2002 to a reported \$110,000 last February. (Token thank yous included a \$6,000 television and a weeklong Caribbean cruise.) Presenters at less prestigious shows still had no reason to complain; the value of the gift basket given to Grammy presenters has doubled in the last three years, to nearly \$30,000.

When spaces in gift bags sold out, marketers started looking for other ways to get their products into celebrity mitts. Thus was born the backstage gifting lounge. Companies as varied as Swarovski, Avon and makers of Roomba vacuums lined up for a chance to throw their goods at visiting A-listers, all in a cozy, homelike setting.

"Five years ago, I had a lot of people look at me like I was crazy," recalls Karen Wood, president of Backstage Creations, which produces gifting retreats at events like the Teen

Choice Awards.

"They said, 'You just want me to donate items and you give them to celebrities?' Now, there's an avalanche of gifting."

Gift bags have also risen in sophistication and grown more common. A company called Swag Bags won kudos from *People* magazine in 2003 for the Japanese-themed silk duffels it distributed at "The Last Samurai" premiere. Inside, Annette Bening and Will Smith found crystal-studded obis and a gift certificate for a year's worth of martial arts classes. Tom Cruise nabbed an even fancier prize; his tote contained a 2,000-year-old Roman coin necklace.

Eventually, the gifting trend spread to noncelebrities. Nightclub openings, movie press junkets, high-profile birthday parties. In October at a fashion show at a private L.A. residence for a designer label called 2B Free, partygoers clamored for sacks containing Steve Madden shoes and sweaters. At a small cocktail party at the Avalon Hotel for a manicure line called Nalinita, editors and other guests got mini-bags filled with bath products, anticeulite face patches and, yes, nail polish.

Nowadays, people joke about putting together entire outfits — down to the panties — culled solely from gift bags.

"We've gotten so spoiled here in L.A.," says Lorena Bendinskas, co-founder of Silver Spoon Entertainment Marketing, a group that throws "buffet" gifting parties, at which celebrities and style-makers stroll from

booth to booth, chatting with sponsors and picking up swag as they go. "Everyone wants their free stuff — publicists, agents, managers. And the key is that gift bag. A lot of times it's swag you don't need or even want, but you have to have it."

"They're like cigarettes. People just sit around talking about where they're going to get one. So many people in L.A. have entire closets and bathrooms just filled with free stuff because of people like us."

As a result, product suppliers are getting warier. Some now demand proof that the celebrities have gotten their gifts, either through photographs or signed receipts. And more corporations are hiring on-site gifting companies like Wood's to control the distribution, rather than shipping their swag to a publicist and hoping for the best.

They're also starting to say no. The makers of Roomba vacuums recently balked at a \$10,000 fee just to have their product included in a gift lounge, not including the cost of the free vacuums.

The company declined to participate, says Kathleen Williams of A&R Partners, Roomba's public relations firm, because such events often attract too few name celebrities and too many "Hollywood barnacles" — managers, publicists, friends and others.

"Three years ago we were maybe participating in five or six gifting events a year," Williams says. "Now we'll do one to two a year, maximum."

"It's getting ridiculous. To charge my client \$10,000 and ask them to come up with \$20,000 in free product is insane. The return couldn't possibly be enough. I would rather buy a 60-second spot on 'Oprah.'"

The gifting companies too are getting pickier about product recipients. Backstage Creations won't even consider throwing a bash unless A-list celebrities plan to attend; B- and C-listers wield little clout in the eyes of the clientele.

Others are downgrading their bags to make things more equitable. At a 2003 Frankie B. fashion show in Culver City, guests leaped from their seats to nab Silhouette sunglasses left on the chairs for front-row guests. To avoid a melee last year, the designer gave every guest a less-ex-

pensive gift bag.

"It was a perplexing situation," Frankie B. publicist Serena Cicora says. "The sunglasses situation polarized people." So the next year, she says, "it was either give everyone something or nobody gets anything."

Gift-lounge organizer Lash Fary of Distinctive Assets, who assembled last year's Grammy gifts and is planning this year's swag as well, has his own favorite horror story about an interloper he calls Canary Sweatsuit Woman.

The woman, accompanied by a boy she said was her TV actor son, bulldozed her way into the Kids Choice Awards gifting tent in April, Fary says. The tent, labeled "Talent Lounge," was for presenters and performers only. The child was not on the guest list.

"This woman said, 'We are coming in here, because my kid is talent,'" Fary says. "She starts to curse and scream. We had to have a security officer escort them out."

It didn't end there.

"She was wearing this canary-yellow sweatshirt. Five minutes later, I was taking a celebrity to get her gifts and I turned around, and lo and behold, Canary Sweatsuit Woman is there, taking video games and purses."

Once again, Fary had to find a security officer to boot the lady out.

"She was the most aggressive moocher I've ever experienced."

But certainly not the only. A sticky-fingered mystery woman of 60 or so has spurred lounge organizers to double security at many events.

"This lady crashes the lounges," Bendinskas says, adding that the invader often poses as an editor or reporter.

Recalling a particularly nasty episode two years ago at the Chateau Marmont, Bendinskas says: "We caught her after she'd actually stolen from one of the jewelers at the event. She just five-fingered it. We caught her with a \$300 or \$400 piece of jewelry in her bag."

No one had the heart to call the cops on the now-mortified woman, Bendinskas says, so "we confiscated the bag and just had her escorted out."

Fary sums up the trend-trend-trend-madness this way: "We're gifters and bouncers at the same time."