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Friday, September 14, 2007

[National Post > News >](#)

Putting the swag into the stars' swagger (page 1 of 2)

They love free stuff, and companies love the advertising

Nathalie Atkinson, National Post

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Swag. Outside of the celebrity bubble, the word still refers to the spoils of crime or pirate booty. Swag's grey industry of celebrity giving and taking has even created a new transitive verb: to gift, as in, "Andre 3000 was gifted with vintage Nike sneakers," and "We're gifting diamond pendants only to A-listers this year." The stars get gifted with swag in lounges, where they drop in for a photo op and a free pair of jeans. As the recent short documentary *Sundance Celebrity Swag Hunt* (starring Gary Coleman) explains, that filmfest is affectionately known in the industry as Swagdance. Here at the Toronto International Film Festival, gifting isn't quite as vulgar as free safari vacations and wide-screen Plasma TVs. Celebrity freebie culture has only been a part of the festival for a few years and, this year, swag's buzz-by-association PR was wrapped in a worthy cause: charity and the environment.

The Tastemakers Green Room, as one lounge at the Park Hyatt was called, was entirely eco-themed, from the cork floors and living wall of green to Adria Vasil's bestselling how-to tome *Ecoholic* and Timex's new Sports Luxury collection (its eco angle is the self-winding, self-charging battery activated by wrist movement).

"Say the word organic and the American celebrity's eyes light right up," one sponsor tells me. The Wardrobe Lounge, a space for stylists and stars to promote Canadian and international style collections, also had giveaways for select stars. It took over the model suite of MuseumHouse, discreetly tucked in the round driveway just a stone's throw from the Four Seasons Hotel. The Right Hand Gal and Jamieson Vitamins anchored the IT Lounge on the mezzanine of the Windsor Arms Hotel, where boldface like Leelee Sobieski, George Stroumboulopoulos, Tonya Lee Williams and Kelly Macdonald rediscovered the Esprit brand, which is reinventing itself in the Canadian market.

Yesterday, on the last day of "business," sponsors in the IT Lounge are weary but as peppy as ever, even after eight solid days of chatting and shilling with media and stars. Esprit has given about 80 autumnal toggle coats away (each valued at \$149.50), along with 100 argyle cardigans and many military-inspired men's sweaters. Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie and Terrence Howard didn't visit the lounge during the fest, but when they got wind of the IT Lounge's Big Brothers Big Sisters charity affiliation, they all arranged to have swag donated on their behalf; Ryan Gosling came by and did the same, as did many stars. Bollywood star Sameera Reddy packed a box of Comfy Easy PC from Taf Toys to bring back to India and donate to the orphanage she supports.

Last week, I'd been most impressed with Moor Allure Naturals, an innovative new skin care brand from Newmarket, Ont., and its comprehensive press kit. Founder Jan Blackstopp, a former licenced massage therapist with 30 years in the natural medicine field, discovered a supply of bioactive, mineral-rich moor soil on her family's property in rural Ontario. Like several of the brands launching here, she invested all her marketing and publicity budget in the swag lounge.

Blackstopp estimates she has given out over 250 bags of Moore Allure's five-piece kit (\$195)--almost \$50,000 worth of product -- and the lounge's final day has only just begun. That's on top of the initial participation fee (a few thousand dollars). At the major entertainment award shows and festival abroad, participation fees start at \$2,000 but can quickly climb to upwards of \$20,000 for gifting villas at Cannes (or chalets at Sundance), in addition to the cost of shipping, staffing and value of all the product given away. At those rates, Canadian gifting suites seem like a bargain. Was it worth it?

continued on page 2

NATIONAL POST

[National Post Home](#)

Search for

in the National Post

find

Friday, September 14, 2007

[National Post > News >](#)

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"I have now mastered the art of the three-minute blurb," Blacktopp laughs, still enthusiastic. "It's my life, so it's not a sales pitch. Everyone loves a story, and being a woman over 40, an entrepreneur and in my second career, I have a story to tell." Blacktopp chose a gifting lounge to launch the line into the marketplace for the buzz and access it would give the brand. But it was the first media day, in which she met over 100 editors and writers, that was the most important facet of Moor Allure's presence at the festival, for securing potential future editorial coverage.

"I don't typically package in a fancy white bag with logo and tissue," Blacktopp adds, "because that's excessive packaging and doesn't fit the product, which is natural and environmental, but it was for pictures and publicity."

Another happy IT Lounge sponsor is Heart Chocolate, the new 60-calorie chocolate bar that contains CM-X, a proprietary compound that purports to lower cholesterol and blood sugar. On the very first day, Toronto's upscale boutique supermarket Pusateri's came by, wanting to be the first to carry the bars. Since then, Heart's distributor has lined up Whole Foods and is negotiating a deal with a 700-store video chain.

Access to the stars through a lounge is also what enabled young Canadian designer Jason Myers to get his black silk trapeze dress onto the back of Rachel Leigh Cook for her movie premiere and Mena Suvari's wrist to jingle with bangles from emerging Calgary jewellery designer Dean Davidson; both starlets perused the wares on loan at The Wardrobe Lounge. And you'll probably spot Ryan Gosling and other young Hollywood types in Trove Clothing's new organic, super-soft T-shirts on the pages of a tabloid soon; many of them scooped up several of their graphic and cheeky T-shirts. Trove gave 275 of their \$75 designer tees away.

"The reaction was so positive from everyone, I was really surprised at the interest, the intelligent questions," Blacktopp continues. She is particularly pleased that George Stroumboulopoulos asked her a lot of questions about renewable resources and because of her years of research, she could supply him with hard data and statistics. "Bringing Moor Allure to Toronto was just an amazing experience. I didn't realize until I came here how small I'd been thinking."

HOW IT REALLY WORKS

Swag's quid pro quo is an awkward pose in front of the logo wall or holding a product aloft, like a would-be model at a car show. You're unlikely to see Clooney or Kidman posing with a bottle of water, because gifting the truly A-list is entirely another animal. That's why it takes practice to decode the subtle layers and lingo of swag PR when you're reading InStyle or a weekly tab. "A favourite of" could mean that Kidman really bought that scent at a store in Santa Monica, because the clerk has an arrangement with the magazine to rat on who bought what every week; more probably, Kidman was sent an unsolicited gift basket, via a circuitous route that ends with her publicist.

In Deluxe, Dana Thomas catalogues some of the excesses of gifting and swag, and the truth about where those unsolicited packages of goodies sent to desirable celebs via their publicists to generate buzz wind up. "That's what I'm here for -- to handle the avalanche," says Troy Nankin, publicist for such stars as Hilary Swank, Angie Harmon and Selma Blair, to Thomas. "I send it to the mom or to a charity. Escada sent these purses around before Christmas, and then Us Weekly runs a photo of Selma Blair with a caption that reads 'Selma Blair loves her new Escada bag.' No, Selma Blair's maid loves her new bag."

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