

# Goody-goody, freebies galore

## Pricey gifts part of the allure of awards shows

By Ann Oldenburg  
USA TODAY

"N Sync loved theirs. Tommy Lasorda was worried when he didn't have his. Oprah Winfrey sent a thank-you note for hers.

Gift baskets, goody bags or party favors, call them what you want. Extravagant freebies for the stars have become the must-have item at awards shows.

Never mind Eminem and Elton John. The big buzz this week at the Grammy Awards was the \$15,000 gift baskets given to all presenters and performers — especially Madonna's, which came to \$20,000 because some items were made just for her.

"These baskets are turning into one of the biggest selling points of the awards shows," says Matthew Brady, director of V.I.P. Services for the ESPY Awards. "It's who can get the biggest and the best gift bag."

At the recent ESPYs in Las Vegas, Brady says, Lasorda checked into his hotel room and was afraid organizers didn't know where to deliver his goodies — valued at more than \$5,000. So he called up Brady; the basket found its owner.

The gift baskets at the Golden Globes in January also were valued at about \$5,000. Sixty stars got 100-year-old, red-painted Chinese wedding chests, filled with items including a Bacara Resort and Spa gift certificate (\$1,200); \$1,200 Christian Dior watch; Palm III (\$300); Ericsson World Phone (\$350); Philips Rush MP3 music player (\$300); and Bottega Veneta passport holder (\$260).

But it's Distinctive Assets, a young Los Angeles company run by partners Ash Fary and Jaimi Blakey, that has bested them all so far by compiling the most lavish loot.

Here's how it works: The companies donate the goodies, and the stars either wear or use them in public, which sends the public scurrying to copy them.

"N Sync was quite taken with theirs," says Fary, who personally delivered some of the Grammy baskets, which were packaged in \$500 Tumi duffel bags.

"These are people who clearly can go out and buy a Tiffany watch



By Jeremy Kunkel

**Free stuff:** The \$15,000 goody bags for the Grammys included cosmetics and fragrances from Donna Karan, Tumi luggage, even a toothbrush.



By Robert Hanushko, USA TODAY

**Madonna:** Her Grammy bag had \$20,000 worth of merchandise.

but we're trying to introduce them to new and unusual things," Fary says. "No matter how wealthy you are, you never get past liking to get free stuff."

But the real justification is this: "They don't get paid for their time, so it's a nice thank-you gift."

For the companies, which pay a promotional fee and provide the items for the baskets, it's good public relations. "They're getting exposure to 20 or 30 of the top trend-setting people in the world," Fary says.

Some of the Grammy goodies:

► Sports Club/LA Bi-Coastal Membership Package (including 10 massage treatments and 20 personal training sessions), \$6,000.

► Ian Schrager Hotels — two-night stay at any of the chain's luxurious hotels worldwide, \$1,500.

Add to that Donna Karan fragrances, Avon nail polish, coffee, hair-care products, chocolates, sea mud soap, candles, fleece jackets and more. There are even pet accessories valued at \$250 from Doggie Chic.

Blakey says it's important to note one thing that also went into the baskets: a book called *The Art of Giving*, with stories of sick children who have benefited from giving. His company hopes to add to the stories, getting some from stars, and turn them into a book with

proceeds going to charity.

In the last year and a half, Distinctive Assets has done the American Music Awards, the Academy of Country Music Awards and the Daytime Emmys.

They took particular care in putting together Winfrey's Emmys gift bag, including items for Stedman Graham, her fiancé, and for her dogs. "Oprah called to say thank you for the gift basket. She said, 'You clearly put thought into it.' That meant a lot," Fary says.

Next come the Oscars, and nominees for best actress and best supporting actress are getting their first gifts: from Victoria's Secret. Each is being sent a black sheer bra with a clasp in front that has nine small diamonds. It's valued at \$1,500.

## Briefly

**Proof of flop:** *Proof of Life* tanked at the box office because of the high-profile romance of its stars, Meg Ryan and Russell Crowe, says Taylor Hackford, the movie's director. "It had an indelible and very destructive effect on the release of the film in the U.S. because the real-life story overpowered the film," he said Wednesday.

**Where was Britney?** The reason Britney Spears wasn't at Wednesday's Grammy awards ceremony? The pop star is in Sweden, recording material for an album due out in November, says her spokeswoman.

**Grammy numbers:** Preliminary ratings show the Grammys program was the most-watched of the night, with 26.8 million viewers, exactly 1 million shy of last year's number, the best since 1993.

Distinctive Assets produced the gift bags for the 42nd Annual GRAMMY® Awards.