

The Swagman is Coming to Town

It's Christmas in July—or September, or November—when industry companies commence their giveaways. **Charles Kaiser** rummages through his memories of gift bags past and present to answer the vital questions: What is swag and what is its purpose?

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When you hear the word "swag," what do you think of?

Chances are the average Joe on the street imagines the ill-gotten booty of pirate treasure, while fans of *Trading Spaces* or other home-improvement shows think of window coverings. If you're from Australia, thoughts of "Waltzing Matilda" come to mind. However, since you're reading this article, I'm pretty sure you know just what swag means in the context of the live-performance industry. But for those of you who came in late—or, God forbid, have never been to a trade show—it's free stuff, given away by companies. Almost anything can be swag, and it can have just about any value. But who gets it, who gives it, and why does it exist?

The hierarchy of swag

Swag, in its many forms, is handed out in a variety of circumstances. Most of us are familiar with the T-shirts and hats given to local crews as a thank-you for their work on a touring show. This swag might also be given to a show crew by a rental house or equipment supplier. This is practical swag—this is swag that gets used. I don't know of any anyone on the technical end of the performance industry who can't use another T-shirt or baseball cap. I have a closetful, and am always happy for more.

Trade shows provide another level of swag. Why do most people line up and then rush the show floor as soon as the doors open? Are they eager to see the latest products, the hottest technical innovations? Heck, no—they want swag! This is promotional swag. It may or may not be really practical, but it's free, and free is always good. However, I am firmly convinced that there are two forms of trade show booty: there is *public* swag and there is *secret* swag.

If your attendee badge marks you as a student, you will only get the public form of swag. But if your credentials identify you as a potential buyer, then you very well might get

some secret swag. This is the high-class stuff. For example, gel companies always have big bowls of color-swatch books on their stands; anyone can take them. However, if your badge marks you as the lighting director of a large opera company, then you just might find yourself in possession of the deluxe swatch book. Then again, when everyone else gets a brochure or catalog, you might just walk away with a shirt or cap.

The secret swag secret? Never ask for it. It must be offered, and you must get involved in a serious discussion with a company representative before the offer will come. I remember my first-ever secret swag: Credentialed as a lighting designer for the Greater Miami Opera—now the Florida Grand Opera—and at my first major trade show not as a student, I got a designer-sized swatch book from a major gel manufacturer and a baseball cap from a high-end scroller manufacturer. All I can say is, secret swag rocks!

As for public swag, some of it is useful and some isn't; then again, even when you're past 40, it's still fun to get a free yo-yo or a foam football. Perhaps the most useful thing I've ever received is a business card from a major rigging company; on the back, it has some really useful information: fleet angle data, cable and connection data, and a listing of arbor capacities. On the card's front, along with the standard information, is a 3.5" ruler, along with markings for a protractor. I keep this item in my wallet, and I use it often.

Maybe the most useless swag ever is a spring-loaded, fold-up flying disc, which I got from a major lighting-software developer. Sure, it's fun, but it doesn't help me in my job. If they had coated one side in silver Mylar, it could have been a nice reflector, for photography or film use. But, like I said, it's fun and it was free, so I'm not really complaining. And if you are just a student, don't despair. At the most recent



PHOTOS: CHARLES KAISER

USITT StageExpo in Toronto, a major gel and gobo manufacturer had some great public swag. Hidden away in its bag of information were two steel gobos. That put the value of the bag at well over 10 bucks! To those of you were there—you know who I'm talking about: How many bags did you score when you found out about the gobos? Come on—be honest. I know that you got more than one.

Glamour swag

When you move beyond the realms of touring and trade shows, you enter the higher echelons of swag. I'm talking about the really good stuff. Some of it is found in opening-night gift bags for Broadway and West End shows. These gifts can be worth hundreds of dollars. For directors, cast members, and designers, they can be worth even more.

My first major gift bag came when I worked as the second assistant lighting designer for Richard Pilbrow on the Toronto production of Livent's *Show Boat*. The loot included a tote bag, shirts, a crystal candy dish, champagne flutes, and more. Richard gave me a really nice leather wallet and an autographed copy of his book. I still have the wallet, and the book has pride of place in my library. Be warned, however, that the quality of opening-night gifts can be an indication of the producer's financial health. My *Show Boat* gift bag was nice, but the quality and quantity of Livent opening night gifts declined with every show after that. When all I got for *Fosse* was a tote bag and a water bottle, it was pretty obvious

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that something was wrong; not long after that, the company was bankrupt. Note that a decline in the quality of company parties is also a sign of financial trouble.

Of course, the crème de la crème of swag is given only to the stars. I'm talking about the gift bags given to writers, presenters, and recipients at the major award shows. These can be worth more than \$100,000! Jewelry, designer clothing, electronics, expensive perfumes, exotic foodstuffs, and more are to be found in those bags. Most of us will never see swag of this caliber. To be honest, it hurts to read about it. It just doesn't seem fair that those who can most afford the luxury items given out at the Oscars and the Grammys are the ones most likely to get them for free. Humor columnist Dave Barry recalls getting an Oscar gift bag, which he describes as "a laundry hamper . . . the height of Dustin Hoffman." He adds, "I was afraid that some actual working people would drive by and see me—a man who, in return for thinking up a few jokes, got a Cadillac and thousands of dollars worth of luxury items—and they would have no choice but to stop and beat me up."

So what is the purpose of all of this free stuff? What's the reason for all these bags and bags of swag? It can't exist just to make us happy, so there must be some ulterior motive for all of it, right? Sure, there is—it's called advertising. The companies that make stuff want their names out there. They want them in your face, and they want

them in everyone else's faces, too. If you're looking to buy lamps or tape, are you going to thumb through your Rolodex or search your PDA for the number, or are you going to take the easy route and call the number on your notepad or that cool glow-in-the-dark magnet on your gel cabinet? People are lazy; that's what the companies are counting on.

As for all those logos on hats and shirts, the more times that a prospective buyer sees someone wearing a T-shirt or hat from a certain lighting company, the more chance there is that he or she will remember that lighting company when buying time comes around. Even the luxury goods are really just advertising. If a certain brand

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of watch or sunglasses is good enough for Julia Roberts, then it must be good enough for you, right? There really is no such thing as a free lunch—or free swag—so you are now somewhat unwittingly a walking billboard for the latest moving light, or your desk topper or mouse pad is an ever-present ad for a control console. There's nothing wrong with that. It was "free" and free is always good.

Happy swag hunting! ☺

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