Celeb Charity

The Truth About Celebrity Benefit Concerts

Dorothy Pomerantz, 01.26.10, 01:00 PM EST

Sometimes celebrities are the best people to rally donors.

In Pictures: The Biggest Celebrity Benefit Hauls

LOS ANGELES -- Friday night's Hope for Haiti Now concert was a huge success, raising $57 million so far for organizations like Oxfam America, the Red Cross and UNICEF that are working to help victims of the Jan. 12 earthquake. Organized by actor George Clooney and musician Wyclef Jean, the event was a star-studded, bicoastal concert featuring performances from U2, Alicia Keys and Bruce Springsteen, among others.

We've come to expect celebrities to rally with a big concert event in the wake of a tragedy. Benefit concerts have been in vogue since 1985's Live Aid, which raised $245 million for famine relief in Ethiopia.

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At the same time, it's natural to feel a bit cynical watching Madonna in a fancy leather jacket, with a face seemingly improved by thousands of dollars' worth of plastic surgery, singing and asking viewers to donate small sums to help people in Haiti who are hurt, homeless and starving. She's clearly rich (according to our last Celebrity 100 list, Madonna earned $110 million between June 2008 and June 2009). Why doesn't she just donate some of her own millions to those suffering in Haiti?

According to Paul Schervish, director of the Center on Wealth and Philanthropy at Boston College, by appearing in the Hope for Haiti Now concert a star like Madonna can raise more money and create more happiness than she could have by just donating on her own.

Schervish calls this kind of fundraising catalytic philanthropy: Instead of just opening their own wallets, celebrities can inspire hundreds of thousands of others to give. "They are not able to call up the 20 wealthiest philanthropists, but they can get their colleagues together to perform and get people to attend concerts," says Schervish. "That's emotionally satisfying, and it creates happiness for the celebrities and the people who are donating."

In other words, a benefit concert gives the celebrities the feeling that they are using their particular skills to do something good, and it makes donors feel good because they become a part of a bigger pool of giving. It also obviously helps the people who will receive the aid money.

"People get to see a concert, they get to pool their money and do something big," says Schervish.

Benefit concerts are also a good way to raise money quickly. It doesn't take much work to get artists to perform together as long as the organizers can find the right venue. The recent concerts for Haiti in New York and Los Angeles took place just 10 days after the earthquake struck.

Plus the charities can continue to raise money even after the concert is over. An original song called "Stranded (Haiti Mon Amour)," which was performed by Bono, The Edge, Jay-Z and Rihanna during the Haiti concert is now the most downloaded song on iTunes and a CD version of the concert is the biggest one-day album pre-order in iTunes history. Hope for Haiti will continue accepting donations for another six months at www.hopeforhaitinow.org. It remains to be seen whether donations will eventually top the biggest charity concert events like Live Aid and America: A Tribute to Heroes, which raised $150 million in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.