

LIVING THE BRAND

All that glitters



Martha Stewart knows how to turn ideas into gold, so are local trendies right to diss her, asks Craig Jacobs

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'ALL the cool kids are walking out," Khaya Dlanga tweets from the Cape Town Convention Centre. Dlanga, one of the country's most prolific posters on social networking site Twitter lists himself as a speaker, blogger, copywriter and political commentator. He was one of hundreds who had come to the Design Indaba to hear the world's queen of good housekeeping, Martha Stewart.

Dlanga's posting, however, reflected how many felt about Stewart's talk, "A better world through creativity".

"Colour has always been an integral part of my life," Stewart continued as the red of the empty chairs became more pronounced as more delegates

got up and walked out.

"Here is my rose garden. It has been a tremendous source of inspiration" she said as a slide projected on the oversized screen.

In the auditorium's reception area, those who had just left were staring bemusedly at a screen floating from the ceiling which was projecting a stream of posts from tweeters attending the conference.

"One of the freakiest talks I've ever scene (sic): the combo of deep banality and ferocious ambivalence," tweeted iconeye.

"Martha don't f... with design professionals. They will flambé you," said nicdesign.

"Thinks Martha Stewart should be re-sentenced for boring people to death" said danparmenter, referring to her 2004 prison term for insider trading. And so it went on.

Arriving in the media room about an hour later, Stewart seemed oblivious to the sniggers.

She probably hadn't been on Twitter and seen the disparaging remarks yet. The celebrity housemaker, who boasts more Twitter followers than anyone else in attendance (according to Twitterholic, she is the 38th most popular tweeter with close to 1.9 million people following her), says she has reduced her use of the site to three minutes a day.



In person, Stewart looks very much like the down-to-earth poster woman for middle America, her face lightly dusted with makeup and her wardrobe nondescript.

Look a little closer, though, and you'll notice trendy wedge heels and huge gemstone earrings peeping out of her medium length blonde hair.

Stewart's journey into celebrity homemakermomdom, that would turn her into one of the world's most successful women, goes back as far as the '70s when she started a catering business in her basement. Her big break, as it were, came when her husband, then working for a publishing company, roped her into catering for the launch of a novel. At the party, Stewart met Alan Mirken, the head of another publishing company who was so impressed with her talent that a book deal would later transpire.

Entertaining was published in 1982 and went on to become a New York Times bestseller (and the biggest selling cookbook since Julia Child and Simone Beck's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*).

A series of other books followed and by 1990 she had her own magazine, *Martha Stewart Living*, and was regularly appearing on television programmes.

And then the unthinkable happened — Stewart was found guilty of insider trading in March 2004 and sentenced to five months in prison and two years supervised release. But rather than flopping the soufflé completely, the incarceration seems to have made her even more determined to succeed.

Today, Stewart is back at the helm of *Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia*, which positions itself as "a leading provider of original 'how-to' information, inspiring and engaging consumers with unique lifestyle content and beautifully designed, high-quality conscious products".

Her empire spans publishing, broadcasting (including *The Martha Stewart Show*, which attracts high-profile guests from Snoop Dogg to talk show king Conan O'Brien, and radio programme *Whatever, Martha!*, which is hosted by her daughter, Alexis Stewart, and Jennifer Koppelman Hutt) and the Internet (three websites including marthastewart.com which allows visitors to access over 10 000 recipes and a variety of blogs — even one for her dogs called "The daily wag").

Cut through the icing, though, and what makes the Martha Stewart machine such an effective business model is that her media assets which combine



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practical advice and entertainment, are also a conduit to roll out an endless array of merchandise which her audience gobbles up like apple pie.

The term "living" as part of the brand name couldn't be more apt as Martha Stewart can totally creep into every aspect of your life. You could have a Martha Stewart wedding, move into a custom-built Martha Stewart home, fill it with Martha Stewart home items, order Martha Stewart flowers, sit in a Martha Stewart chair and rest your feet on your Martha Stewart rug as you write thank you notes on your Martha Stewart stationery.

Soon you will also be able to clean your home with Martha Stewart natural solutions after you've whipped up your favourite Martha Stewart recipes using your Martha Stewart products, including poultry, baking mixes and dried pastas.

It is for that knack of making everyday items desirable that the brain behind Design Indaba, Ravi Naidoo, says Stewart appeared to be a great lure for this year's conference.

It is also something Stewart touches on, saying: "I was hoping the young entrepreneurs (attending the talk) would understand that you need to be thorough and constantly monitor things, making that beautiful idea a real business."

Certainly the local design industry needs pointers when it comes to taking a clever design concept and giving it enough traction so that it can become a staple in the home of anyone from Elsie's River to Malibu.

Sure, there are emerging design stars like Haldane Martin whose Songololo couch has been featured in exhibitions from Oslo to Paris, and has garnered a slew of local design awards. But how many of us are willing to fork out over R145 000 for an eight-seater?

Tellingly, Stewart didn't think too highly of the emerging design talent celebrated at the Design Indaba.

"The products that these young people are designing do not tend to be terribly useful. There is a lot of creativity there, but I haven't seen a lot that makes me think: this is something I can't live without."

So what can't she live without?

Stewart, who uses her seven homes as "laboratories" to try out different concepts and to adapt the objects inside them to create new lines is now turning her attention to Corian, a hard polymer-based material which can be used to create different surfaces inexpensively and environmentally sensitively.

Then there's the range of tools that she is about to release, tapping into America's renewed love affair with home-made craft and DIY projects as the recession makes people reassess their priorities.

Perhaps, though, the thing that rankled all those creatives the most was Stewart's sales pitch for glitter as the biggest trend to hit middle America.

During her presentation, she told the audience how the Martha Stewart lines in glitter are making "millions of dollars" and how consumers can e-mail a favourite picture which her company will be able to reinterpret into a traced out version, allowing them to colour them in with "glitter by numbers".

The following day, talking to a more receptive audience made up mostly of housewives and foodies at the same venue, Stewart admitted as she spoke about the virtues of the product that she "got into trouble yesterday because people thought I spoke too much about glitter in my speech".

And while the earlier group were visibly bored as she mentioned how her magazines have covered the uses of glitter in over 50 different articles, as she showed the same slides to this less critical audience, from behind me I could hear one of the housewives mutter: "That's truly amazing. I wonder where I can buy it..."

