

CHANTAL APPLEWHITE
(Class of 1975)



When the international Star group announced that TCM director Chantal Applewhite had been named as one of its “Leading Women Entrepreneurs of the World”, Applewhite thought it was a joke. Accustomed to keeping a low profile as she builds her company, Applewhite says she was surprised and a little taken aback to hear of the nomination.[PICTURE]The recognition is a rare honour bestowed on outstanding women entrepreneurs around the world every year. To date, over 280 women from over 50 countries have been named as honourees for their accomplishments in the business world. Only a handful of South African women, among them property business leader Pam Golding, have been recognised by the foundation in the past. Once honourees have been named, they essentially become part of an elite global “club” of top businesswomen, who meet to network and contribute to social responsibility programmes. The award focuses on women in a bid to strengthen their position in global economies. “Many women in business do experience a unique set of challenges,” says Applewhite. However, she does not feel this holds true for the IT industry. Applewhite says she has never experienced discrimination because she is a woman in a male-dominated industry. “I think there may be less discrimination in IT than other industries because it is a relatively new field. It isn’t locked into an ‘old boys school tie’ mentality. Anyway, it really wouldn’t matter if people did want to discriminate.

If you have work to do, you should just go ahead and do it as well as possible – regardless of the attitudes of others.” Xhead = Staying focused Applewhite says that while she has worked in the South African IT industry for nearly 25 years, she prefers to keep a low profile and focus on what really matters to her – TCM. The business was established in 1987, when IBM disinvested in SA. It grew from a partnership and a handful of staff to a major company with over 230 employees, five major branches and 28 points of presence throughout SA. It is one of the biggest IBM business partners in the Southern Hemisphere and its customers include 400 companies, many of them international and many JSE-listed. The company’s main focus, however, is in the small and medium enterprise space.[PQ]The company has received several awards from IBM and the IT community as a whole, among them IBM’s Top Achiever awards for the past seven consecutive years; Premier IBM AS/400 Business Partner in 1997, 1998 and 1999; and Most Admired IT Companies awards in 1996 and 2001. “Any successes we have had can be largely attributed to our commitment to customer service. This has been our main driver.

We aim to provide customer satisfaction and value. This value extends to our staff too. We respect staff needs, help to build and skill them, and so ensure loyalty and better customer service.” The customer satisfaction levels are reflected in the company’s growth, which Applewhite says is extremely strong at the moment. Xhead = Team work Applewhite is clearly a team player, saying that TCM’s success is due to her co-directors and staff as a whole. “We have top staff members – dedicated people with a lot of integrity. We never compromise on customer service, and everything else flows from there,” she says. Applewhite maintains a hands-on management style, personally involving herself in staff selection and ensuring that in-house mentoring and training takes place. While her IT roots are in programming, Applewhite has acquired extensive business skills through a series of courses and hands-on experience, and says she has always hired the best possible consultants to guide the company wherever needed. “We’ve made some good calls and had excellent advice over the years. For instance, we resisted the listing boom, leaving ourselves in a far stronger position than we would have been.” Applewhite describes herself as a positive person, who sees opportunities and goes after them. “I’m also very hung up on doing what’s right,” she muses. “I was brought up to ‘remember who got you where you are’. TCM is where it is thanks to a strong and committed management team and top staff. Without them I wouldn’t be very far.” In addition to running a growing company, she also has to juggle the demands of raising a young family. “I’m very lucky. I have a great job and a great home life. I’m blessed. Certainly, I work long, hard hours, but I have a life I really enjoy.”