

# Queen of the co-ordinated outfit



by  
**SUSAN  
SEGER**

*Cape Town-based image consultant Chato Romano found her 'makeover' skills in such demand among South African women that she started a bi-monthly magazine. Launched in October last year, it sold more than 25 000 copies and 1 800 people have subscribed.*

**C**HATO Romano was never interested in dolls. As a toddler she would make a bee-line for friends' mothers' wardrobes to play among the contents.

As a teen, her greatest pleasure was to study what women were wearing and tell them what was wrong.

One day, she took a long, hard look at a friend's mother, who was wearing a very wide belt. "I begged her to take it off and we fiddled around with other belts until suddenly she had a waist and a body. I took 'before and after' pictures and showed her. She couldn't believe her eyes. From then onwards, I was her consultant," Romano says.

This first client told friends about Romano's skills and eventually the young girl found her weekends packed with consultations with friends' mothers.

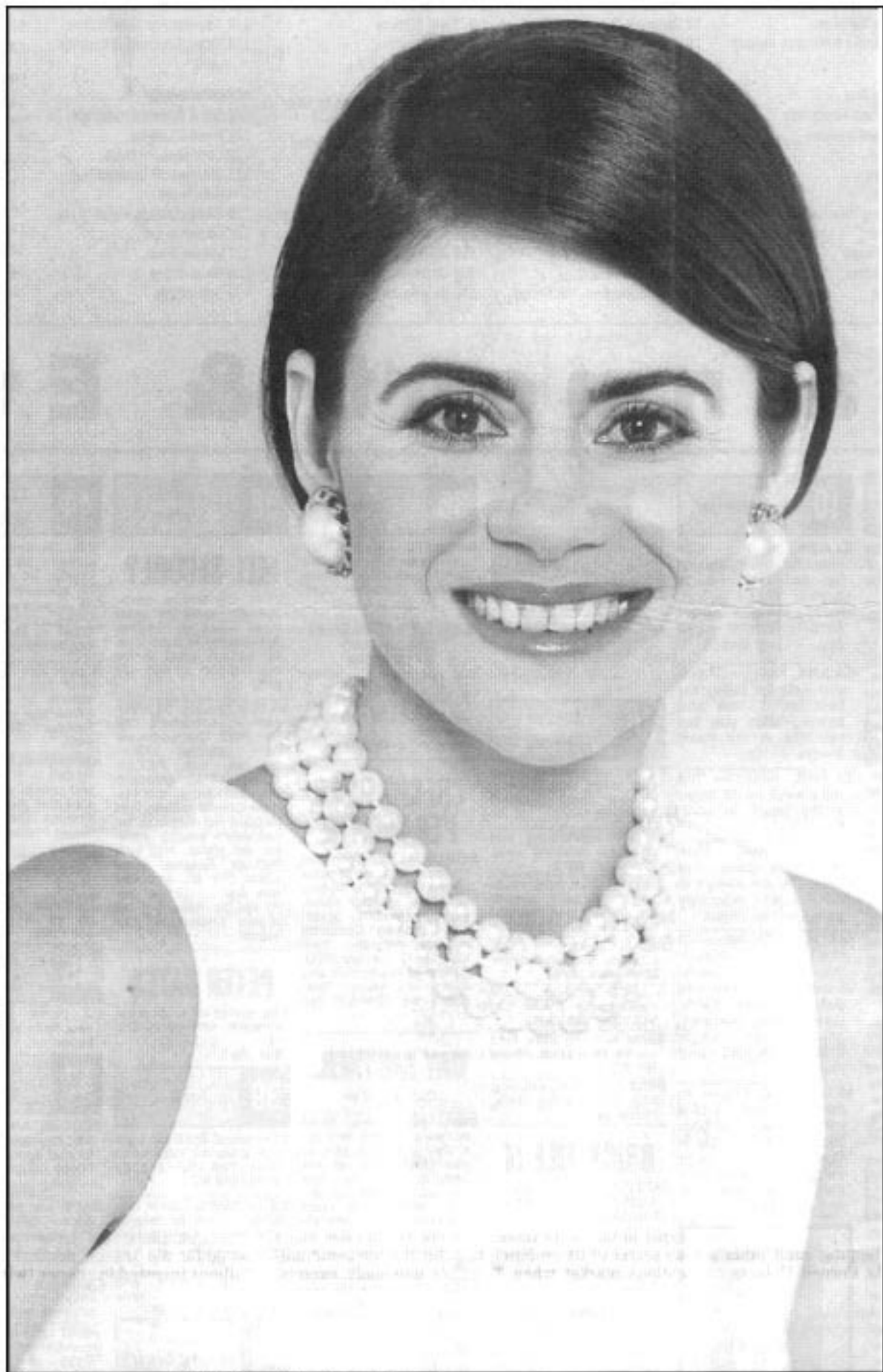
"It was hard work, so I started charging R20 a session," said Romano.

A business had been born and the fact that she was only 14 did not seem strange in the least. Romano had always known what she wanted.

This was displayed when she arrived at Durban Technikon after leaving school to sign up for a three-year fashion design course.

"I showed them a mix-and-match capsule I had designed. They looked at me strangely and said: 'This is not the sort of thing we do.' I said: 'Well, this is what I want to do.' They said: 'Well you can't do that here.' I left."

And, when she applied, aged 18,



Chato Romano . . . 'What I do is just so obvious.'

to the Wooltru fashion retail group and asked for a job: "They said I needed to be 25 to be a buyer. I said 'why?' and told the manager I'd lie in front of his door until he gave me a job." She got the job.

But image consulting was where her heart lay. In 1990, Romano got married and her husband Avri sold his house to help her start the business.

It had a small beginning with Romano giving private image consultations at women's homes and holding small workshops.

In time, she became a sought-after speaker on all aspects of fashion wardrobe planning and professional dress in the workplace.

Since then, Romano has implemented dress codes in more than 350 companies and presented her Wardrobe Planning Workshops to more than 65 000 people. She has also written a book, *Plan Your Wardrobe*, which is in its fourth print run.

The business has expanded so much that she plans to go international. "Our Australian office will be up and running soon -- that country is opportunity island," she says.

The Chato Romano operation has four legs: training seminars for corporates, national workshops for groups of women, private home consultations and other opportunities such as launch products with her label.

Her corporate client list includes Arthur Andersen, Standard Bank, Eskom, Woolworths, Stuttafords, Chanel and Radio 702, as well as the department of Foreign Affairs.

"We assist with corporate image as well as teaching staff how to help clients. So many corporates just don't know about the importance of image. Just look at the green used by Hyperama. When I present my training seminars, the sales assistants lap it up. My argument all along has been that, when a client goes into a store, it is not enough for all the staff to just stand there and say 'that looks lovely'. Staff must know what they are talking about and offer sound, constructive advice. But, often they don't have the skills to offer advice and it's not their fault.

"The amazing thing about what I do is that it is just so obvious. There is such a need for these skills. I have just dented the marketplace."

One of her favourite stories is the one where she was briefed by the management at Radio 702 to try to get the staff to dress smarter for work. "I arrived there to find a

bunch of very resistant journalists. They were all checking their diaries and their cellphones were ringing. I had to think fast. So I called the scruffiest chap to the front and asked him how he dreamt of looking. He said he wished he was taller. We started experimenting with a few garments. Before I knew it, they were all engrossed and they didn't want me to leave."

The four-hour image workshops, attended by up to 100 women at a time, focus on make-up, fashion and clothes, and how to wear them.

It was when Romano realised that she could not keep up with the waiting lists for her workshops that she decided to launch the magazine. "I needed a different forum to reach the women. It broke my heart to turn people away. They would say, 'I've saved up so much to do this workshop, you have to let me on' or 'I lost 20 kg to do this'. I am responsible to these women. But I'm battling to keep up."

Romano is at present training assistants to run the workshops.

She believes there are many women who want to express their individuality but do not know how.

***'It broke my heart to turn people away. They would say, 'I've saved up so much to do this workshop, you have to let me on' or 'I lost 20 kg to do this'. I am responsible to these women. But I'm battling to keep up.'***

"I try to teach women to go for what suits them, to incorporate their own sense of style."

Having spent a few months in Australia recently, she believes she will have a tough job in that country.

Romano's long-term goals are huge. She envisages launching the magazine in the U.S., Europe and Australia. She's also keen to start a Chato Romano website to give basic advice on style.

A Chato Romano video, television programmes and satellite workshops are also possibilities and she intends bringing out a range of travel accessories with her label.

Besides that, men are starting to nag for their own style workshops and a magazine.

"But that's for another day," says the woman whose motto is to live life to its fullest.