

Aisha Pandor sweeps up two titles at the PriceCheck Tech & E-Commerce Awards

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

5 Oct 2016

Aisha Pandor, co-founder and CEO of [SweepSouth](#), swept up two titles at the 2016 [PriceCheck Tech & E-Commerce Awards](#) on 22 September, where she was named both *Best Female Tech/E-Commerce Entrepreneur* and *Best Black Tech/E-Commerce Entrepreneur*.



The Awards unveiled the emergence of niche e-commerce businesses that exemplify the innovation taking place within specific sectors. SweepSouth is one such business that has applied the Uber operating model to provide on-demand domestic cleaning services in South Africa, with plans to expand further into Africa.

“The success of these passionate entrepreneurs who are breaking ground within niche categories really speaks to the importance of understanding and believing in your product,” said Kevin Tucker, founder and CEO of PriceCheck, in a press release sent to Bizcommunity. “To gain traction in today’s online marketplace requires far more than just a product and a slick platform, it requires real passion and a willingness to put yourself out there behind your ideas.”

This speaks to Pandor who has a PhD in Genetics and left her management consulting job after she and her husband, Alan Ribic (co-founder) struggled to find a part-time domestic cleaner over the holidays – they not only identified a need, but became aware of the inefficiency, disempowerment and inadequate pay of domestic cleaners in general, and sacrificed so much to bring technology to an industry that had previously “remained antiquated and in developing nations has not progressed much in the 21st century”, Pandor told Ventureburn soon after launching in 2014.

Commenting on the recognition, Pandor said, “Building SweepSouth hasn’t been easy especially with us being a pioneer on the continent in terms of on-demand home services. When we launched as the first in the home cleaning space, it was the first time ever that someone had booked and paid for a home cleaning service online in Africa. Bearing that in mind, it’s an honour and gratifying to be recognised for our efforts.

“More than anything, this is also recognition for my very diverse team who work extraordinarily hard every day,” she added.

“I look forward to the day when there are so many black and/or female founded businesses around that an award like this is made moot, but for now I hope this serves as inspiration for other young business people who look like me, and may previously have been intimidated by not seeing people who look like us, or come from similar backgrounds, in the tech industry.”

Here, a Q&A with Pandor on their mission to challenge not only the tech, but also the entire philosophy around this industry.

■ The Awards coincides with the launch of the SweepSouth app. Why did you decide to introduce an app, why now, and how does it enhance the user experience for both cleaner and customer?

Part of what has made SweepSouth successful thus far is how we combine the data we collect on how our SweepStars (cleaners) and customers are using the platform, with our own skills, insight and intuition. We didn’t want to build a mobile app just for the sake of building one, or because ‘apps are sexy’. We had a mobile web app already, and this was ensuring that customers were able to have a good experience booking on mobile. However, we responded to how customers were using the platform and features they were asking for, and built an app to address that. It also serves as an additional acquisition channel, and improves on the convenience of booking. It has been fully developed and built in-house, meaning all of our team’s experience has been poured into it, and it has some great native – and distinct – features from the web platform.

Our app allows a full native experience (e.g. card scanner on iOS), a quicker booking process – particularly for existing customers, use of the phone’s geo-location functionality to pinpoint address, and some fun new app features that will be released in the next week or two.

■ What other features and service improvements are you currently working on?

We’re constantly updating our app and platform and have some really exciting new features lined up. We’re also working hard to keep up with big increases in volumes, and ensure that our rapid scaling is accompanied by increased ability of our operations and support teams to facilitate this growth. This is really exciting for us and where the power of having great tech really shows itself.

■ You’re introducing your services to Durban later this month, and you expect to expand

internationally next year. Which countries/markets are you looking into and why?

We're so excited about our Durban launch and growing in that city whilst learning more and more about its idiosyncrasies. Internationally, we're looking into markets like Kenya and Ghana, and eventually Nigeria, which face the same issues South Africa does around domestic work, and reliably and efficiently connecting cleaners to homeowners. These are also markets with a large pool of unskilled or semi-skilled labour looking for work, coupled with a growing middle class who have less time, but more income, to handle home services.

What have been some of the major challenges you've had to overcome to get to this stage of the business?

Being the first service like this to launch in South Africa (and in fact in Africa), we had to deal with needing to not only cater to, but create a new market for the service (i.e. 'teach' people that they could find and book home cleaning online). Only two years ago, there were still a lot of people weary about e-commerce and online payments, and we had to emphasise the safety and security of the platform again and again. This is something that we've seen a noticeable change in from 2014 to now. We've also had to tackle old, traditional and sometimes outright racist attitudes towards domestic cleaners, and as a result we've made it our mission to challenge not only the tech, but also the entire philosophy around this industry.

On a personal level, we've put all of our finances into SweepSouth and sold our house and car, and at various points we found ourselves struggling to pay for groceries or school fees. A particular low point was having to contemplate selling my wedding ring to get us through a particularly bad month.

You've been selected to go through to an Endeavor ISP next year. What would being part of a global network of like-minded entrepreneurs mean for you and the business?

Endeavor is a really prestigious network and in addition to being successful, we've found the people who are part of it to also be smart, supportive, socially conscious and just general good people. This means we'd be part of a global network with aligned values, which also gives us exposure to international markets and expertise for our planned growth. Unlike many other networks, they are truly global and not just US- or Euro-centric, so have experienced mentors in the emerging markets we will potentially be operating in.

Why is high-impact entrepreneurship important to you, and how do believe you're making a difference?

My life purpose is impact and I feel like without making an indelible mark on the environment I'm operating in, my career and the hard work and 18 to 20 hour days would hardly be worth it. It's central to what drives me. People measure value differently, but if you're able to empower and uplift disenfranchised and marginalised groups and do good business while you're at it, I feel you've done a great job. SweepSouth has created work opportunities for well over 1,000 women so far, and with 71% of these women being previously unemployed and 29% being previously underemployed, we are creating impact. This positively affects not only SweepStars, but their extended families, as 74% of cleaners on the platform are primary breadwinners who can now take care of those around them.

By encouraging flexible work whilst still having decent wages, we're helping women work towards what is important to them outside of domestic work, and giving SweepStars the opportunity to care for family or pursue skills development and other opportunities. For example, we have SweepStars who've recently used SweepSouth to save money towards nursing, social work, or teaching qualifications, and even one of our former top-rated cleaners launching a crowdfunding campaign to start her own restaurant in Langa.

What advice would you give to aspiring black/female entrepreneurs?

So much! That first and foremost, nothing lends you more credibility, and silences naysayers more, than producing high quality results, so forget the politics and let your work speak for itself. Also, early on I used to be intimidated sitting talking to other founders and investors, who would for the most part be white males who had been exposed to this environment for years and years. I felt like a complete noob, but I reminded myself that I belonged in that environment and had earned a place there, and soaked up as much knowledge as I could. Realise that often you have insights that are typically overlooked or simplified by mainstream tech and business, so you have a huge opportunity to use that to your benefit. Finally, surround yourself with excellent mentors and a good support network made up of people who will be real with you, but who also understand your struggles and will both push and support you.

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