

International Business News

Google buys shopping comparison site Like.com

AFP, San Francisco

Search giant Google has bought the shopping comparison website Like.com, the two companies said on Monday.

Like.com specializes in visual search technology that lets people hunt online for bargains using pictures of clothing, handbags, shoes or other items they might desire.

"We're pleased and excited to welcome Like.com to Google, where they'll work closely with our commerce team," Google spokesman Andrew Pederson said in an email response to an AFP inquiry.

"We're excited about the technology they've built and the domain expertise they'll bring to Google as we continue to work on building great e-commerce experiences for our users, advertisers and partners."

Like.com websites will continue to operate separately from Google operations, according to Pederson.



Chinese visitors eat icecreams next to a huge portrait of former South African president and anti-apartheid icon Nelson Mandela outside the South African pavilion at the site of the World expo 2010 in Shanghai yesterday.

Reliance Power eyes \$5b Indonesia investment

REUTERS, Jakarta

Reliance Power is considering investing as much as \$5 billion in Indonesia, a spokesman for Indonesia's vice president said on Tuesday.

Reliance Power's chief executive, J.P. Chalasani, met Indonesia's Vice President Boediono in Jakarta to discuss investment in the southern part of Sumatra island, said Boediono's spokesman, Yopie Hidayat.

"Reliance is involved in several projects, including railway and developing a coal mine in South Sumatra. The investment is estimated at \$5 billion," Hidayat said.

He said Reliance Power plans to produce 50 million tonnes coal a year within five years from mines in South Sumatra province and plans a 230-kilometre railway that will link its coal operations in Batang Hari, South Sumatra, to a port in Jambi. Hidayat gave no further details.

Southeast Asia's biggest economy has seen a steady pick up in investor interest over the past 18 months, thanks to a combination of political stability and improving economic growth.

Nokia and Intel launch joint research lab

AFP, Helsinki

US computer chip giant Intel and Finland's Nokia, the world's leading mobile phone maker, said Tuesday they had opened a joint research laboratory on Finland's northwestern coast.

Intel, whose processors power nearly 80 percent of computers worldwide, said in a statement the centre would "employ about two dozen research and development professionals."

The centre is hosted at the University of Oulu, which said the lab's research activities had "started gradually in August."

Intel said the lab would work on developing "interfaces that are more similar to interactions in the real world," with the aim of making the use of a mobile phone "more natural and intuitive, in the same way that modern games and movies are more immersive through the use of realistic 3-D graphics."

Gates and Buffett due in China to meet the wealthy

AFP, Beijing

Bill Gates and Warren Buffett -- who persuaded 40 US billionaires to donate a fortune to charity -- will meet a select group of wealthy individuals in China next month, a spokesperson said Tuesday.

Microsoft mogul Gates and investment guru Buffett launched a project in June called "The Giving Pledge" aimed at convincing billionaires across the United States to give up most of their money -- 50 percent or more -- to a good cause.

Just six weeks later, 40 wealthy individuals and their families -- including CNN founder Ted Turner and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg -- pledged to hand over more than half of their fortunes.

A spokesperson for the project, who refused to be named, said Tuesday that while Gates and Buffett were planning to visit China in September.

RMG SALESMEN WANTED

Merchandising degree optional

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

Five months ago, David Hasanat, chairman of one of the nation's largest knitwear and woven goods exporter, all but gave up his search for employees with an academic background in merchandising to help Gazipur-based Viyellatex Group increase its sales.

Instead, he hired graduates from other disciplines and arranged a six-month training programme on apparel merchandising.

"In the absence of graduates in merchandising, I prefer to appoint graduates those who have an MBA or textile technology degree," Hasanat says.

"This is a common problem in the country's highest export-earning garment sector, as we have no other choice but to appoint graduates from other disciplines as the merchandisers," he says. He says salesmen need a high IQ level.

The shortage of qualified merchandisers led many Bangladeshi garment exporters to turn to Sri Lankan, Indian, Chinese and Philippine merchandisers, he says.

Abdullah Al-Mamun has hired four merchandisers from other academic disciplines at his company. The country manager of Amerex, a liaison office of US buying house of ready-made garment (RMG) at the city's Banani area, he says all four merchandisers are now performing well.

But it was not his first choice. "I wanted to appoint the graduates on merchandising, but I had no choice," he recalls.

A merchandiser convinces buyers to sign order forms, communicates the details to the production manager and advises buyers of problems. In Bangladesh, he also calculates the costs of certain inputs (fabrics, buttons, etc.) required to fill the order, ensures quality and may help source the inputs.

Merchandiser help develop a strategy that enable a company to profitably sell a range of products. A merchandiser will work closely with a buyer to ensure the product bought will enable the retailer to achieve his sales targets.

Garment manufacturers say a merchandiser typically handles about 75 percent of the costing of production for an order. A successful merchandiser needs a positive mindset, tolerance, good communication skills and social flexibility.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association Institute of Fashion and Technology (BIFT) is the only



David Hasanat, chairman of Gazipur-based Viyellatex Group, says the shortage of qualified merchandisers led many Bangladeshi garment exporters to turn to Sri Lankan, Indian, Chinese and Philippine merchandisers.

public university programme for merchandising. BIFT offers a four-year honours programme and a one-year masters in merchandising, which graduate 200 and 120 students respectively every year.

The institute also offers a one-year diploma in merchandising, he says, and an affiliated program with National University which awards a professional diploma on merchandising for the mid-level officials after just six months.

Mohammad Jamaluddin, a former merchandiser and an associate professor at BIFT, says that's not enough. The garment industry's rapid expansion has outpaced the university's ability to grow.

In fact, the four-year program now graduates 24 percent fewer students than when it started in 2004. (These graduates were freshmen in 2000.)

The shortage of quality public university spaces for merchandising students has been filled by private centers. Unfortunately, he says their brisk business has involved poor training in the subject.

A merchandiser must speak English well, have technical knowledge of the goods and have a basic knowledge of mathematics, styles and fashion, he says.

"Bangladesh has started producing professional merchandisers," he says. "So far, we have mostly run merchandising on trial-and-error methods."

Jamaluddin, who is also the head of the BIFT's Merchandising Department, says inexperienced merchandisers' trial-and-error method initially creates a lot of waste due to miscalculations. But eventually they learn.

Some Bangladeshi merchandisers are reefat@thedailystar.net

TOURISM

After Islamic food and banking: halal travel

AFP, Singapore

In his days as a jet-setting telecom executive, ready-to-eat meals were a regular part of Fazal Bahardeen's luggage.

Many of the hotels he stayed in did not have halal-certified restaurants for Muslim travellers like the 47-year-old Sri Lankan-born Singaporean.

Rooms lacked markers pointing to Mecca for prayers and staff were unable to answer questions from Muslim guests about their particular needs.

"Half of my life was spent in hotels and airplanes," Fazal told AFP.

"But being a Muslim, I was getting frustrated by the travel industry or the hotels not being able to provide the right services. You don't know what the prayer time is, where the prayer direction is, and you can't find halal food."

But halal travel is now gaining popularity as demand for products and services permitted by Islam extends beyond food and interest-free financial instruments, and affluent Muslim travellers make their influence felt.

Halal travel is expected to be worth 100 billion US dollars annually within two years, said Fazal, who resigned from a senior management job at a major telecom firm in 2006 and set up his own company to tap into the expected boom.

Fazal's Crescentrating Pte Ltd is believed to be the only company in the world that rates hotels globally for their friendliness to Muslim travellers.

Its online booking portal www.crescentrating.com also



This photo taken on August 11 shows Fazal Bahardeen a 47-year-old Sri Lankan-born Singaporean speaking to an AFP reporter during an interview in Singapore.

promotes halal tours. Travel commentator Yeoh Siew Hoon told AFP there is a real demand for halal travel, led by tourists from Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

"Take Indonesia -- it is one of the fastest growing outbound markets in Asia, and is the number one source of visitors to Singapore," said Yeoh, who operates an industry website www.webintravel.com.

"Tourism Australia also produces a guide to halal restaurants due to the growing numbers of travellers from Muslim coun-

tries," she added. Greg Duffell, chief executive of the Bangkok-based Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), said China's sizeable Muslim population is another potential source of outbound travel.

"A lot of suppliers are now amending their products to meet halal standards," Duffell told AFP.

"It is a trend that started a few years ago. Since then, restaurants and resorts in Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam too have begun adapting their standards, so it's beginning to branch out," he said.

"There are more designated halal restaurants in hotels now, and prayer facilities on the premises, especially at the airports."

Crescentrating's hotel grading system ranges from one to seven and is based on the availability of halal food as well as prayer rooms and mats -- and the non-availability of forbidden items like alcohol and adult TV channels.

A rating of one is given to a hotel with no such facilities but whose employees are trained to answer questions from Muslim guests.

This can be raised a notch if the hotel has a list of halal-certified restaurants in its vicinity -- even if it does not have one itself.

The company's highest ratings, six and seven, require a hotel to be free of alcohol, discos and TV channels showing movies unsuitable for families and children. In addition, all food and beverages must be halal.

Globally, only Dubai's Al Jawhara Garden Hotel has a rating of seven, while three hotels in Saudi Arabia and one in South Africa are rated six.

The halal food industry is worth 600 billion to 650 billion dollars a year, according to Fazal and industry reports.

Islamic finance meanwhile boomed when Muslims began to look for investments approved by their religion, and the sector has attracted non-Muslims too after the global financial crisis.

"The halal consciousness is rapidly going beyond food and finance," said Fazal, arguing that with 1.6 billion increasingly wealthy Muslims worldwide, halal-friendly travel is likely to be the next growth area.

Muslim travellers account for seven to eight percent of global tourism expenditure, which totalled around 930 billion dollars in 2009, up from just three-four percent 10 years ago, Fazal said.

This share is expected to expand to 10 percent in the next two years.

Crescentrating also hopes to stamp halal-friendly ratings on theme parks, convention venues, cruise ships, shopping malls and hospitals used by medical tourists.