Tech tops 2011 resolutions for small business

REUTERS, *Chicago*

A woman sits in the crowd in Times Square to celebrate the New Year's Eve in New York on Friday.

REUTERS

Charlie Raines has resolved to become more Web savvy in the New Year in order to haul in business overseas for his fledgling Florida-based seafood company.

"I realize that being on the Internet is definitely the way to go," said Raines, 49, who began his career as a fisherman in 1986. He later ran a seafood business in Thailand before reestablishing in Tampa last year as Fresh Stonecrab. "You have to follow the market wherever it is if you want to stay in business year-round."

Raines's ecommerce site will go live in early January, well ahead of March's Boston Seafood Show, where he hopes to make a splash with potential customers. It will allow sourcing of fish from markets such as Canada and China after Florida season slows in April. Raines eventually wants to host seafood auctions online.

Raise a glass to search engine optimisation, Twitter, Facebook and the myriad other online tools that let small companies, like Fresh Stonecrab, compete with bigger fish. Commitments for Internet-related improvements, simple to complex, are emerging as the focus of many owners setting New Year's resolutions for the coming year.

"I've re-launched my website and I want to make sure that I'm updating it often so that I can really optimise - and also update my social media platform," said Felicia Frazier, owner of a small business that dresses up the interiors of residential homes so they are better positioned to sell in the competitive real estate market.

Frazier, 37, launched Staging by DWELL 15 months ago after her job in technical design was eliminated by retail chain Limited Too, whose stores were folded by parent company Tween Brands. She said she recognizes the importance of building a strong Web presence to create awareness for the emerging business, which is run out of her Columbus, Ohio home.

"It's been pretty slow but my business mirrors the real estate industry," said Frazier, who remains energized at the prospect of running her own show after years in the corporate world. "Now is the time to get myself together so that in 2011 I can really be focused and go full force."

SMALL TECH STEPS

Other small companies are taking up the technology mantle in the coming year, as they once again prepare to do more with less.

Take AUM Framing & Gallery, one of the oldest custom-framing shops in Denver, Colorado. The business, which built its reputation around customer service, transferred ownership last year. As luck would have it, the buyer was a former information technology consultant with a penchant for photography.

"It was very much an operation that had grown considerably, purely through its reputation," said 54-year-old Trevor Byrne, the new owner. "The previous owners didn't do any marketing and they weren't technologically savvy."

He's changing things fast. By early next year, Byrne plans to have two websites operational, one for the AUM's retail framing operation and another for its gallery, as well as a presence on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. In addition, he aims to introduce informational video about the business on YouTube.

"The thing is just really getting people to know about us," said Byrne, who is also committed to training longtime staffers, many of them artistic types, to start capturing email addresses and related information from existing customers.

"It's a different environment," said Byrne, who is working to reverse flagging sales. "Our objective is to grow out customer base and therefore our revenue in 2011."

Other companies, having already seen the power a strong online presence can have on sales, are vowing to take technology to the next level.

That's the case with Dannijo, a luxury fashion jewelry retailer founded in 2008 by sisters Danielle and Jodie Snyder.

The Snyders already sell much of their jewelry and accessories online at Dannijo.com, a site that was revamped only weeks ago. Next year they want to boost their presence on emerging platforms such as Tumblr, the micro blogging site, as well as Svpply, which lets users create their own collections of favorite products and recommend them to friends.

Carrefour arrives in India

AFP, *New Delhi*

French supermarket giant Carrefour has opened its first cash and carry store in India, hoping the government will soon relax restrictions on foreign investment in its massive retail sector.

The 5,200 square metre (56,000 square feet) wholesale store in the east of the capital New Delhi and is open to food firms, institutions, restaurants and retailers.

Carrefour Group chief executive Lars Olofsson said in a statement on the firm's website on Thursday that similar outlets were set to open in the near future.

"This first step is essential to allow the Carrefour teams to fully understand the specificities of the Indian market and then build our presence in other formats," he added.

Indian regulations mean that "cash and carry" is the only way that foreign firms can establish a presence in the country except for single-brand chains such as Reebok and Levi's.

The arrival in India of Carrefour -- the world's second-largest retailer -- comes some years after its main rival in the sector.

US giant Wal-Mart has already opened two wholesale stores and plans to open 10 more within four years.

Carrefour hopes the company's first outlet will lead to the creation of supermarkets across India, where a strong base of middle-class consumers has developed among the 1.1-billion-strong population.

India agreed in 2006 to allow foreign investment of up to 51 percent in the retail sector but only for shops selling single-branded products like Reebok, forcing overseas companies to sign franchise agreements with Indian firms.

Wal-Mart signed a partnership agreement in 2006 with India's Bharti Enterprises while Britain's Tesco formed a tie-up with the giant Tata Group conglomerate.

According to India's Economic Times newspaper on Thursday, Carrefour and India's Future Group are in line to sign a deal in 2011.

The arrival of foreign companies into the Indian retail sector is a sensitive issue, as small shopkeepers fear being driven out of business by multinationals.

Industry bodies want the retail sales sector to be liberalised gradually but calls for the market to be opened up to foreign competition have increased in recent months, notably during visits by Western leaders.

Both US President Barack Obama and his French counterpart Nicolas Sarkozy urged India to remove restrictions on foreign trade and investment.

DoCoMo aims to take on iPad

AFP, *Tokyo*

Japan's top carrier NTT DoCoMo is to launch a tablet computer running Google software to challenge Apple's hot-selling iPad, a report said Saturday.

DoCoMo will marry the new Google-backed Android operating system with a device made by South Korea's LG Electronics to launch the product in Japan by the end of March, the Nikkei business daily said, without naming sources.

Users will be able to get on the Internet via DoCoMo's cellular connections, it said, adding pricing and other details

Indian group buys luxury London hotel

AFP, *London*

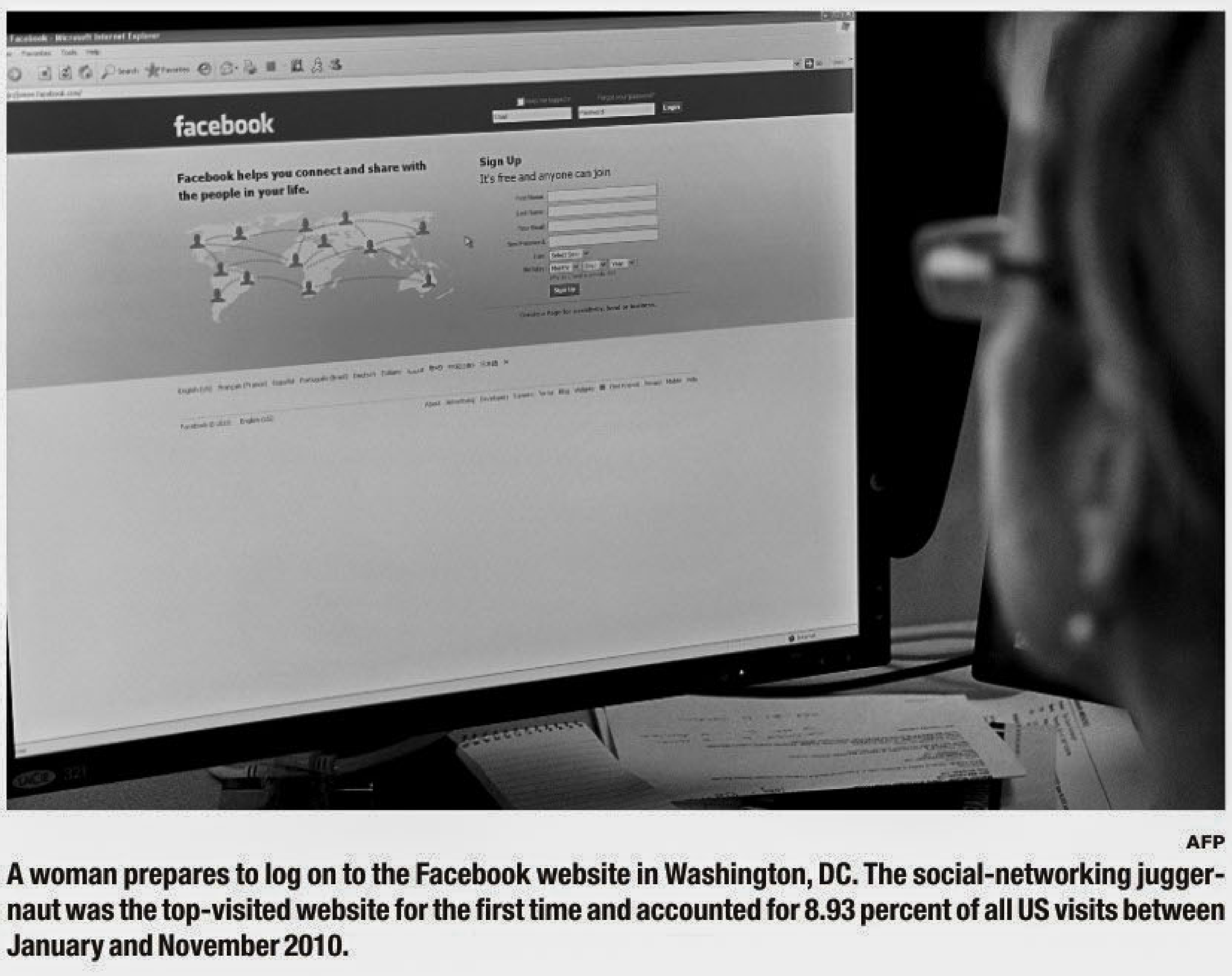
The conglomerate, Sahara India Pariwar, has bought London's luxurious Grosvenor House hotel from state-rescued Royal Bank of Scotland for 470 million pounds ($728 million).

"We are extremely happy to announce Grosvenor House joining the Sahara family," Sahara Group chairman Subrata Roy Sahara said in a statement published Thursday.

"The valuation of the hotel, three years back was more than 1 billion pounds. The valuation, even today is quite high but due to highly satisfactory due diligence by the Royal Bank of Scotland and after long and strict negotiations, we have

Facebook tops Google in website hits

AFP, *New York*



AFP

A woman prepares to log on to the Facebook website in Washington, DC. The social-networking juggernaut was the top-visited website for the first time and accounted for 8.93 percent of all US visits between January and November 2010.

Facebook stole the thunder from Google this year as the most-visited website in the United States, according to a new study from Internet research firm Experian Hitwise.

The social-networking juggernaut's www.facebook.com was the top-visited website for the first time and accounted for 8.93 percent of all US visits between January and November 2010, Experian Hitwise said.

Google, the world's Internet search leader, slid to second place. Google.com drew 7.19 percent of visits, followed by Yahoo! Mail (3.52 percent), Yahoo! (3.30 percent) and YouTube (2.65 percent).

Facebook led arch-rival Google in the number of hits per month since March.

However, taking into account all of Google's websites, such as YouTube and Gmail, the Mountain View, California-based company drew 9.85 percent of the US visits, ahead of Facebook's 8.93 percent and the 8.12 percent garnered by Yahoo! sites, an Experian Hitwise spokesman said Friday.

Online tracking firm comScore last week ranked the Yahoo! family of websites as the most-visited in the US in November, ahead of Google, Microsoft websites and Facebook.

On a global scale, Google held the top position, followed by Microsoft, Facebook and Yahoo!, according to comScore.

But analyst Greg Sterling of the specialist site SearchEngineLand.com cautioned that the Hitwise study does not track website visits via mobile devices such as cell phones or tablets, and the number of searches on Google's Chrome browser, which avoids google.com, was uncertain.

"This is right now more symbolic than anything" to see Facebook overtake Google in the United States, Sterling told AFP, adding that the study confirms "Facebook growth has been dramatic."

The social-networking giant has more than 500 million active users per month in the world, and according to comScore attracted 647.5 million unique visits in November, a jump of 48 percent from a year ago.

Sterling highlighted the sharply different approaches between Google and Facebook.

"Google is a very utilitarian site, where people go to make a decision, whereas Facebook is for entertainment," he said.

But if Facebook "were to concentrate on search, they could do something that stands to really hurt Google."

ArcelorMittal matches rival offer for Baffinland

REUTERS, *Paris/Toronto*

Steel giant ArcelorMittal upped its takeover bid for Baffinland Iron Mines on Friday, valuing the company at about C$550 million ($550 million) as it pursues its undeveloped iron ore deposit in Canada's Arctic.

Baffinland shares rose 4.3 percent to C$1.44, above ArcelorMittal's sweetened offer of C$1.40 a share, suggesting that some investors hope the bidding battle that began in September will continue.

Rival Nunavut Iron, backed by private equity and a Canadian management team, is also offering C$1.40 a share, but for 60 percent of the company.

ArcelorMittal has plenty of ammunition if the contest heats up, with cash and cash equivalents of $3.5 billion as of the end of September.

One Baffinland investor said it would be difficult for Nunavut Iron -- a company backed by U.S. private equity firm Energy & Minerals Group and formed solely to bid for Baffinland -- to increase its offer.

"My gut reaction is that this probably is the end of the game. The sense has always been that Nunavut stretched very hard to get to their last bid. Where are they going to find more?" said the shareholder, who asked not to be named because he was not cleared by his firm to speak to the media.

Nunavut Iron raised its offer for Baffinland earlier this week, challenging ArcelorMittal's friendly bid of C$1.25 a share for all of the shares.

Nunavut started the takeover battle in September, offering 80 Canadian cents a share. ArcelorMittal initially countered with an offer of C$1.10.

Nunavut Iron Chairman Bruce Walter told Reuters the firm is now mulling its next move.

"It would be fair to assume that what they've done was well within the expected range of responses from them, so we will be considering our options," he said in a phone interview.

"We are going to see how the market reacts and talk to shareholders and see where everyone's views are, and go from there."

Raymond James Equity Research analyst Tom Meyer urged clients to tender their shares to ArcelorMittal's offer.

"We believe the nature (100 percent control) of ArcelorMittal's proposal is superior," he said in a note.