

A Popular Shopping Hub from Rio, Brazil, Tries the Internet Waters

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A working-class shopping complex in the center of Rio de Janeiro city, known as Saara (the Sahara) - Portuguese acronym for Sociedade dos Amigos e das Adjacências da Rua da Alfândega - Society of Friends of the Alfândega Street and Vicinities - has just launched an Internet sales portal.

The site, www.comprenasaara.com.br, is up and running since last week. The shopping complex extends over 11 streets in downtown Rio, and is visited by approximately 100,000 people a day.

The initiative is a partnership between Saara, the Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service in the State of Rio de Janeiro (Sebrae-RJ) and the Federation of Commercial and Entrepreneurial Associations of the State (Facerj).

On the first day of the portal, several stores were on display with a supply of more than 300 different products, including clothing, perfumes, sports items, religious items, party items and decoration.

According to the manager of the project, Margareth Carvalho, of Sebrae-RJ, the portal, which took two years to develop, is still in a stage of evaluation. "We registered a small set of stores and products because we are still testing the system. We want to see how they are going to work with virtual sales," she claimed.

The project started being developed in the second half of 2006, with the objective of creating something new in order to increase the companies' visibility and stimulate their sales. "We had to provide training to the businessmen, with tips on how to manage inventories and establish partnership for payment and delivery of the products," she explains.

Sebrae invested approximately 200,000 Brazilian reais (US\$ 102.480) in the creation of the portal, which will cater to purchase orders all over Brazil, and also in training storeowners to manage the new tool. The Postal Service will be in charge of delivering the orders. There will be the option of making payments electronically by credit card or bank slip. The operations will be managed by the Brazilian Savings Bank (Caixa Econômica Federal).

According to Margareth, six other companies expressed interest in participating in the portal. "We were sought by stores specialized in sales of Indian, Arab and gypsy clothing, fitness wear, beachwear, party items and professional uniforms. The number of stores should increase rapidly," said the manager.

The number of storeowners enrolled in the portal is expected to rise to 50 by the end of 2009. The expansion of sales should attract the businessmen. "Our perspective is for sales by the stores enrolled in the portal to increase by 20%," she said. "Now, we are going to follow up the managerial reports to see which are the most sought products and to assess the functioning of the site," explained Margareth.

The name sounds like a desert, but the Saara in Rio de Janeiro seems more like a sea of people. Everyday, around 100,000 people show up at the complex of stores that extends across 11 streets. The Saara association was founded in 1962 by local businessmen.

As time passed, the region became so popular that it encompassed an entire region in the center of Rio, bordered by the Andradas, Buenos Aires and Alfândega streets, and the República square.

Presently, the location comprises 800 stores that sell clothing, toys, shoes, sports items and party items, among others. "If the services sector is included, the number of stores rises to 1,200," says the manager of Sebrae.

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