

Google launches project for S.African businesses

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(AP) -- Getting more small companies wired will help their businesses grow, and help their country fight unemployment, officials said Thursday as Google launched a project that makes it easy to showcase South African entrepreneurship on the Internet.

With a few clicks Thursday, the first entrepreneurs used Google Inc.'s Woza Online to create their own websites. Woza Online, which Google launched with help from South African government researchers and cash from [mobile phone company](#) Vodacom, offers free domain names with South Africa's co.za tag for the first 10,000 applicants.

It took Rajis Reddy less than 15 minutes to set up a website for her company, which employs 10 craftsmen and other workers in rural eastern South Africa to create traditional, brightly colored wooden toys.

"We've developed a website!" Reddy said. "I can't believe it."

South Africa has the most vibrant economy in Africa, but also is beset by high rates of unemployment and poverty. The government sees small business as a key weapon in the battle to create jobs.

Businesses with Web presence "are able to be part of the globe," said Elizabeth Thabethe, South Africa's deputy minister of trade and industry, who joined Google executives at Thursday's launch.

"Small businesses are an incredibly important part of a vibrant

economy," said Luke Mckend, head of Google's South African operations.

The numbers in South Africa bear that out, said Taddy Blecher of South Africa's Human Resource Development Council. Blecher said small businesses employ 65 percent of the 13.8 million South Africans with jobs.

"If we can just increase that presence by 10 percent, that will create 1.4 million jobs, just like that," Blecher said.

Officially, a quarter of the labor force in this country of 50 million is unemployed.

Researcher Arthur Goldstuck, who regularly surveys small businesses in South Africa, says about 400,000, or two-thirds, are online. Woza Online is designed to address some of the most common reasons entrepreneurs give for not having websites - that they are too busy, and lack funds and expertise.

Bryan Nelson, Google's business development manager, described Woza Online as "non-techie, simple, easy to understand."

Toy entrepreneur Reddy's unfamiliarity with the Web was apparent in her hesitant keyboard touch Thursday. But she easily navigated a fill-in-the-blanks process similar to completing an online order form.

Entrepreneurs can dress up their sites with their own images or graphics provided by Google.

Blecher said services South Africans can turn to now would charge at least 1,000 rand (\$125) to design a website, beyond the budget of many small businesses.

"We've been very slack online," said Reddy, who said advertising until now had consisted of word of mouth and flyers. She sells her toys and other crafts at crafts markets in Johannesburg.

She had been considering going online to reach a broader market when a [Google](#) representative saw her wares at a market and approached her about Woza Online.

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