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FOCUS SHIFTING TO GROWTH FROM ECONOMIZING

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INTERNATIONAL

It's a new year, and for executives of Latin American operations based in South Florida, the byword is growth.

A survey of top executives found that cost-cutting no longer holds top priority for multinationals working in the Latin American region.

The focus now is efficiently expanding business, as regional economies steadily recover from their slump earlier in the decade.

Information technology consultants **Neoris** undertook the study together with *Latin Trade* magazine of Coral Gables to better understand the thinking of executives of multinational companies in South Florida who oversee Latin American operations.

The study identified 750 executives in South Florida with responsibility for Latin America and conducted face-to-face or phone interviews with more than 300 executives.

Ultimately, it relied largely on responses with 198 senior executives at 142 companies. About 43 percent of those respondents were chief executive officers; the rest were all chief execs in marketing, finance and other fields. More than one-third of companies included are large, with more than 1,000 employees and $500 million or more in revenues.

For two of five respondents, strategic growth was the top priority for 2005 — not cost cutting.

"That surprised me," said Leonel Carrasco, Neoris' vice president of global strategic solutions, who helped coordinate the study and had expected cost cutting to be a greater priority. "But we found companies have realized it's not enough to reduce costs. They need to maximize investment."

For 2005, most companies aim to boost revenues mainly through their own sales forces, not with outside vendors or through mergers and acquisitions, the study showed.

Budgeting for the expanded Latin American operations remains largely centralized. Indeed, the trend for decision-making on budgets is toward greater centralization, not less — now that Wall Street requires stricter financial reporting for publicly traded corporations, the executives said.

For more information on Neoris, check www.neoris.com.

COMPANIES

■ **PepsiAmericas Inc.**, the second-largest Pepsi bottler with operations in 18 U.S. states, central Europe and the Caribbean, agreed to buy **Central Investment Corp.,** the seventh-largest Pepsi bottler in the United States.

The price tag: $340 million, plus an undisclosed amount for working capital for operations.

Central Investment has bottling and vending operations in southeast Florida and central Ohio. It generates about two-thirds of its sales in Florida.

Executives said the purchase, expected to close by mid-January, will provide additional support for PepsiAmericas' Caribbean operations.

■ Miami-based **Telatinos Inc.**, which provides Voice over Internet Protocol and other telecom services mainly in Latin America, said it has been contracted by Brazil's **Nitrotech Industria** to build and maintain an IPxes communication system including data, voice and wireless services. The contract is worth about $22 million.

■ Delivery giant **DHL,** which runs its Americas operations from Plantation, is expanding in the Caribbean.

The German-owned company opened a new office in Curacao, Netherlands Antilles. It was built at a cost of $3 million and employs 30 people.

■ Florida International University's College of Business Administration has started a consulting service known as the International Advisory Services Group.

The group will work with companies to expand their businesses in the Americas.

Leading the group are management professors Jerry Haar and David Wernick. They will work with professors from across the university.

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