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HEADLINE: Optimism near record, survey shows

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BODY:

Small-business optimism continued rising in December as business owners said they were making plans for buying capital equipment and hiring new employees, according to a survey by the National Federation of Independent Business.

"It doesn't get much better than this," said William Dunkelberg, NFIB's chief economist, referring to a gain in the optimism index to 106.9, 0.7 short of the record high the index achieved in 1983

Of 10 index components, six improved, three deteriorated and one remained unchanged, according to Dunkelberg.

Twenty percent of firms reported they intend to hire new employees, a rise of eight points. And the survey showed that 38 percent of small businesses are planning capital expenditures, an increase of nine points.

"Even allowing for sampling error with the smaller holiday sample, the message was clear: Hiring plans and capital spending plans took off," he said.

"So 2004 does appear to be on track to be the best economy in 20 years, strong growth, historically low interest and inflation rates, high employment rates and more balanced growth, a happy new year indeed," the economist said.

Visa card offers more rewards

Visa USA is introducing a new credit card, called Visa Extras, which it says will allow banks to deliver reward opportunities to more consumer and small-business cardholders than other existing reward programs.

Increasingly, small-business owners are demanding rewards for everyday purchases, according to research compiled by Visa.

"The program not only affords a cost-effective loyalty initiative for issuers that currently do not have co-branded or affinity programs, but also enables them to readily customize the program for their market segments," said John Gould, director of consumer lending and bank cards for Tower Group. Tower Group is a financial research and consulting firm.

Under the plan, reward cardholders will receive points for everyday spending at places that accept Visa cards. Small-business owners will be able to redeem their points at BP, Franklin Covey Co., Marriott Hotels or Staples.

Meetings garner mixed response

Small businesses have more effective meetings than large companies, according to a recent survey by **Interactive Meeting Solutions**.

According to the survey, 38 percent of large-company employees reported that many meetings they attended were "pretty boring," while only 25 percent of small-business employees found the meetings boring. Similarly, 40 percent of large-company employees said the meetings were a waste of time, compared with 27 percent of small-business workers.

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