

FreeDrive CEO Dean DeBiase rests the heels of his black cowboy boots on a window ledge in his North Riverside Plaza office and settles back to schmooze. "These are my lucky boots," he says, tapping a toe. Seven years ago this week, the 43-year-old Lake Forest native left Zenith Electronics for Silicon Valley to head up an online games company for AT&T.

That company is history--sold to America Online in 1996. But DeBiase's move West marked the start of a rough-and-tumble ride that earned him Internet credentials.

He was wearing his lucky Tony Lama boots every day during a 1999 road show to promote one of the year's hot IPOs: an \$80 million offering by AutoWeb, when he was CEO....but DeBiase never fell off his horse. He grew AutoWeb to \$52 million in sales before handing it off to rival Autobytel... DeBiase remains an Autobytel shareholder.

"Combine and conquer is my philosophy," he says. "It's not good to kill your competitor when you're creating a new market. Compete nicely and build your space." Now he's an Internet vet. He's also a gregarious name-dropping marketer with a flair for tech strategy and a track record that suggests he's a good bet as a hired gun to tune-up and unload a struggling online company.

That's his job at FreeDrive, a tiny company with an outsized power board recruited by FreeDrive's cofounder, former Chicago Mercantile Exchange Chairman Jack Sandner. The job offered DeBiase a chance to return home and work for folks who can't help but do him good.

"This is a great little company," he says, rattling off his B2B2C and B2B2B (yes, tech marketers still talk this way) strategies for FreeDrive, which markets tools to store and manage information online.

Back when he headed Imagination Network--the company that took him to Silicon Valley in 1995--the Internet as a mass-market phenomenon was in its infancy and Imagination was a small DOS-based games network where people like Bill Gates and Warren Buffet played online bridge.

DeBiase shifted to a Windows platform and began marketing the network to Internet service providers like AOL. By DeBiase's account, he ran into AOL founder Steve Case at a conference, shoved a cocktail into Case's hand and said, "I need to talk to you." Eventually, Imagination morphed into AOL's first premium channel, ending a glorious freebie era for online card and board game lovers.

At no-longer FreeDrive (the firm started charging customers last year), DeBiase has whittled the staff...and renegotiated agreements with strategic partners. He's scraped up more cash to keep the company going while looking to plug FreeDrive's services into the offerings of major brands...

Carriers like Sprint, for instance, will offer customers FreeDrive's tools to store, retrieve and share Internet files (B2B2C), while partners like EDS, a FreeDrive investor, are marketing applications to businesses (B2B2B).

DeBiase is tearing around town, talking up FreeDrive, and making occasional trips to Washington D.C. for a White House briefing for President Bush supporters or for TechNet, a Silicon Valley-based nonpartisan lobbying group.

"I just love tech stuff," DeBiase enthuses... And he's still got his lucky boots.