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Mark Pine, a former Sybase senior vice president, came out of retirement on a cattle ranch to ride back into the high-risk arena of high-tech start-ups. He expects 1999 revenue of \$20 million at OnDisplay, his San Ramon software firm.

BY CHERYL BOWLAN

Back in college, Mark Pine's boss at a small electronics engineering firm put in his hand a magazine photo of the first microprocessor chip and declared it would change the world. It did, and Pine's life, too.

Nearly 25 years later, Pine, 45, is the president and CEO of OnDisplay Inc., one of the leading providers of e-business software and services. After a 1996 start up, this San Ramon company's 1998 sales reached \$10 million and are projected to hit up to \$20 million in 1999. Recently OnDisplay went public to raise \$46 million in venture capital and carve out a healthy share of the potential \$10 billion e-commerce software market.

Pine's leadership role came after an 18-month hiatus from the hyper-charged high-tech world that emerged from the tiny chip his boss showed him on the cover of *Datamation Magazine*. The exhausting career ride left Pine burned out by age 40. He quit Sybase, where he was a senior vice president, and headed for a Colusa County ranch to raise cattle, grow rice and hang out with his three kids.

"I didn't know if I was going to get back into the business and do something else," said Pine. "But I didn't want to make a decision until I'd been out of it for awhile."

He'd worked in electronics engineering while in college at The University of California, San Diego, earned a degree in applied physics and information sciences, started DigiMedics and Parallel Computer companies, and went to work for ARIX Co. and then Sybase. Under Pine's watch, Sybase's largest product division grew to 800 employees and \$500 million in revenue.

But after a year on the ranch, away from the action centered 150 miles away in Silicon Valley, he realized he needed more in his life. Then the Internet came along.

"I definitely wanted to become part of it," he said. "The Internet touches everybody. It's already used by grandmothers and 5-year-old children. It has had an impact on society in a much shorter time than color TV or the telephone."

Besides, he was still hooked on high-tech.

"Almost everybody in our industry suffers from something that gets into your blood," he said. "It's almost an addiction. The excitement, challenge, pace, risks and rewards — you can't resist."

Pine met Trung Dung, a Vietnamese immigrant who had

developed software that fired Pine's imagination.

"Trung had a vision of the Internet being a lot more than it was," said Pine. "He thought it shouldn't be limited to a human interacting through a browser, but instead allow programs to interact with other programs and applications on the Web."

With \$10 million in venture capital, Dung and Pine founded OnDisplay and launched CenterStage, Dung's Internet innovation. This software creates "sticky" Web sites able to access information inside and outside the site while customers stay put. Sabre Inc.'s Travelocity, Carlson Wagonlit Travel and MicroWarehouse use CenterStage and have earned a ranking among *PC/Computing Magazine's* top 100 Internet Businesses.

Here's why: CenterStage can assemble and sort volumes of data allowing these companies to function as a cyberspace "store" with access to multiple vendors within a self-contained site. Customers appreciate the convenience, and businesses strengthen online relationships with customers by offering one-stop shopping.

"If you wanted to find the best camcorder at the best price on the Web, it would probably take the whole life of a human when our program could do it in a few minutes," said Pine.

CenterStage accomplishes this feat by going to specified Web addresses and extracting specified pages. It can also identify and sort columns of numbers or combine information from several data formats. A customer looking for flights to Paris through Travelocity.com, for example, would also find information about car rentals, hotels, restaurants, local entertainment and culture, weather and more without ever exiting the site.

OnDisplay has positioned itself on the business-to-business side of e-commerce, a market that analysts estimate will grow to \$1.3 trillion by 2003.

"The amount is truly staggering," said Pine. "Today B-to-B e-commerce is at about \$500 billion, so we still have a long, long way to go."

But is Pine planning to go along for the ride at OnDisplay, or will his home on the range call him back again?

"I really enjoy what I'm doing," he said. "And it's an opportunity to be involved in this Internet gold rush. My job is to make this place so big I don't want to work here anymore."

Bowlan is a *Business Times* contributor.