



# HELPING SMALL BIZ REACH OVERDRIVE

Gary native Pierre DeBois, 47, would never have foreseen that his childhood hobby of making replicas of Lamborghini Countachs and Buick Regal T-Types would evolve into an engineering career. And now he's running his own analytics company in Gary, Zimana, where he helps predominantly African-American-owned small businesses boost their website and social media visibility.

AS TOLD TO SANDRA GUY, FOR THE SUN-TIMES

**Question:** After graduating from Andrean High School in Merrillville and Prairie View A&M, you started as an engineer at Ford Motor Co. Why that path?

**Answer:** I had a hobby growing up of building cardboard cars. I loved cars. I knew that certain toymakers would not make certain vehicles I loved, so I made my own with cardboard. I would start by drawing the left side on cardboard, then "the middle" — a front end, hood, windshield, roof, back and front. That became the shell. Then, I'd make the instrument panel and the floor with seats. Car magazines and sales brochures from dealers were my blueprint. The

**VIDEO ONLINE**  
Pierre DeBois' interview at [chicago.suntimes.com](http://chicago.suntimes.com).

hobby taught me to look at detail and encouraged me to pursue engineering.

**Q.** You didn't breeze through college or your MBA. How has that helped you?

**A.** Even though I was a residence hall president at Purdue, it became a struggle academically in the third year. And I didn't want to change my major — mechanical engineering. A neighbor said, "Hey, give Prairie View a try." Prairie View was smaller — about 5,000 students — and, as

a historically black college outside of Houston, culturally different. When you're in an environment that's set up to be hyper-competitive, there's not a lot of room to recover from mistakes. Prairie View provided enough structure to see where I needed to make adjustments.

**Q.** How did you decide to help small businesses using analytics?

**A.** When I was working for Ford, I knew that part of me had always wanted to start a venture capital firm aimed at minority-owned companies. I couldn't help provide venture capital from within the auto industry, and I didn't want to stay in the same career for 20 years. I've always

been a little bit ambitious and driven. I realized that the MBA could put me in an environment where people could guide me in the entrepreneurial steps. So I moved on to pursue my degree.

After I got my MBA from Georgia Tech, I started working with a logistics company in Huntsville, Alabama, that managed equipment and services for the military. Management wanted to know if any of our potential customers who we met at conferences were visiting the company website. At that time, marketers were just learning about Google Analytics — that measures activity on a website — and how

to improve marketing with that data. I saw how analytics could be beneficial to small businesses and how it would raise a conversation about improving sales.

**Q.** What's difficult about dealing with small businesses?

**A.** They are always pressed for time. Clients may tell you one thing is causing a problem, but a couple other issues are actually the culprit. An old friend, a musician who had a studio in Chicago, complained to me about low traffic on his website. I found out he had all these great photos and audio files of the artists and bands

he had recorded with in his studio, but they weren't on the website. We created videos, combining the images with the audio files, and created an image carousel to showcase his services better online.

One of my first clients, a contractor, wanted to use stock images on his website instead of ones with his all-black team. He was concerned that white potential clients wouldn't want to hire his team. I told him that doing so would run the risk of setting customer expectations online and then being something different in person. I do understand his dilemma. Black business owners see cultural challenges

in appealing to a broad market.

**Q.** What do you do for fun?

**A.** Having a life beyond work was impossible my first few years. Over time, I would try to support friends on their big events and do small errands. It's especially important with kids. Years ago, I kept a promise to a friend's daughter that I'd take her to see the movie "Cars" for her birthday. I have a client whose son's elementary school has "adopted" me. They asked me to come read stories to students for Hispanic Heritage Month. Now, I'm looking to get back into things such as playing tennis and doing a few things for myself.