

Automotive Darwinism: How Petrol Brands Can Evolve Into Electric

By Wolfgang Philipp

Darwin would be impressed: Within one model generation, the automotive industry has started a transformation unprecedented in the more than 100-year evolution of the automobile.

A sustainable future is the new common vision and electric mobility is leading the way. Now, once futuristic concept cars make it into series production and the share of BEVs in sales is rising. All good? Electric cars still appear to come with sacrifices – and the EU's plan to ban combustion engines by 2035¹ demonstrates that the change is not voluntary. In this article, we take a look at the automotive revolution from a holistic marketing perspective and assess why, up until now, OEM brands seem to be missing their greatest opportunity in this new era.

The days of customers willing to pioneer and compromise are over. BEVs are conquering the mainstream market now, and in doing so are facing new demands. So far, electric mobility has involved a rather rational discussion: Is it really sustainable, is the infrastructure ready, is it worth it financially?

THE NEW QUESTION IS: DO YOU WANT IT?

The diesel crisis turned the industry upside down. Originally, most manufacturers had planned to meet the strict combined emissions of 95 g CO₂ per kilometer starting from 2020 with highly developed diesel engines². The fall of diesel and the subsequent shift to petrol engines has thwarted this effort.

Electric mobility was introduced by the large OEMs only to meet the regulations, which has led to misconceptions about its full

potential. A new and exciting technology should first create desire, not rationality. Regulatory compliance is the wrong approach to proliferate electric mobility, let alone to evolve a brand into a new era.

ELECTRIC MOBILITY: THE PRODUCTS ARE READY, BUT THE BRANDS ARE NOT

Automobiles belong to the most emotional of product categories. While mobility is a commodity today, the car has become a symbol of personality, a machine of individual freedom, and a personification of who we are or aspire to be.

Like in Darwin's *Theory of Evolution*, today's successful brands have evolved through generations of car models. Their impressive heritage defines their position. Now, within one model generation, the manufacturers have managed to disrupt their evolution by attempting to "go electric" overnight. This revolution has left many loyal customers struggling to identify cohesion between their chosen brand and its new products. As yet they have no emotional connection to electric mobility and fear that with the new products something will be taken away from them.

TO EVOLVE, YOU HAVE TO KNOW YOURSELF FIRST

The recent green narrative contradicts the once proud heritage of many iconic brands of the petrol era. It's becoming obvious that the new era of mobility not only affects their product and their communication, it affects their brand even more. The OEMs have to evolve holistically.

A holistic strategy takes into account that the brand, product, and communication are

¹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/brussels-mulls-dealing-death-blow-gas-guzzling-cars/>

² <https://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/unternehmen/volkswagen-weicht-der-diesel-dem-elektromotor-a-1054755.html>

interdependent and have to be understood in the context of their industry. Such a holistic perspective reveals a bigger picture that outlasts specific periods or technologies. In this picture, petrol, electric – and autonomous driving – are not opponents. They are tools to make a brand come to life.

THE BRAND: A SYMBOL OF MEANING

A holistic strategy gives a brand meaning – an essential pattern across brand, product, and communication. It provides a collective understanding of the brand among internal departments, external specialists, users, and non-users.

Today's search for purpose focuses on the question of why a brand exists. But it remains a vague effort if it comes without meaning – the who of the brand – which is the premise to have a purpose in the first place. The holistic strategy distills the brand's meaning, which automatically comes with a why, and leads to the product and the communication.

THE PRODUCT: THE EMBODIMENT OF THE BRAND

The product or service brings the brand into existence. The holistic strategy provides the link between brand and product. When the brand's meaning is clear, the product's requirements become obvious.

This is a key difference to non-holistic product strategies, which are primarily deduced from a market perspective – the front-wheel drive SUV of strategies. Just because something is selling for one brand does not mean it's the right thing for another. An incoherent product inevitably affects the brand's meaning. In the worst case, the brand becomes arbitrary or even meaningless.

At first sight, electric propulsion seems to be incoherent with passionate petrol brands – when approached from a non-holistic, regulations-driven perspective just to meet CO₂ compliance.

At second sight, the instant torque, the immediate engine response, and the resulting dynamics cast a different light on electric mobility.

The full potential of a disruptive technology for a specific brand can only be tapped by a holistic approach, starting with the brand's meaning. How does electric propulsion correlate with the brand's philosophy? How can electric mobility advance the brand's significance?

A holistic strategy empowers petrol-driven brands to naturally evolve into emission-free mobility while staying true to themselves.

THE COMMUNICATION: CONNECTING THE BRAND WITH THE CUSTOMER

A holistic strategy automatically leads to clear, coherent communication. The story lies within the brand's meaning – it only has to be told. In contrast, the communication of non-holistic brands has to create context in the first place – over and over again.

Consequently, holistic brands connect with their users on a deeper level. The users relate with the brand, not just with the product or the advertising.

This is why today's almost in unison "We're going green" message of the automotive industry sounds most credible from those brands that started off as electric brands in the first place and are now simply continuing to pursue their mission. However, without greater meaning, their theme will become arbitrary once sustainable mobility is a commodity.

A HOLISTIC STRATEGY – THE KEY TO SHAPING THE NEW ERA OF MOBILITY

Emission-free mobility, digitalization, and autonomous driving bring new, additional dimensions of brand experience. It's up to the brands to conquer those dimensions and define their role in them – the greatest opportunity since their founding.

A holistic strategy is the first step in seamlessly aligning brand, product, and communication and gaining momentum for the future. It enables the brands to become shapers again, leading the way instead of following it.

THE END OF CATCHING UP WITH TESLA

Tesla started one step ahead in the electric evolution. Now, with the worldwide consensus that BEVs are leading the way into the new era of mobility, Tesla's meaning and approach perfectly correlates with the disruptive regulation changes.

Other brands merely imitating Tesla's output with a completely different mindset cannot prevail against them. However, a holistic strategy can help them find their own coherent approach in order to evolve.

This is essential for their long-term survival. Once climate-neutral propulsion and autonomous driving are commodities, the difference will be the meaning of mobility – fueled by the meaning of the respective brands and expressed in their products.

Deliberate self-driving, autonomous driving, and owned and shared mobility will offer much more individual and diverse use cases. This is where strong brands can make all the difference.

THE END OF SKEUOMORPHIC DESIGN

With the emergence of the family face design, the front grill has become the most distinctive design feature of the brands, growing in size to convey power. Without the combustion engine, the imposing grills are devoid of purpose, reduced to a mere styling feature – sometimes even covered with plastic panels.

The new era of mobility is an era of design. It is responsible to reinterpret the brand's meaning with the laws of the new technology and translate it into human logic.

Exterior and interior design turn into a holistic user experience design, digitally transcending the car. The design's aerodynamics become an integral functional part to achieve range. In the quiet environment of the electric car, sound design shapes the acoustic perception of the brand. In autonomous mobility, the car's communication design replaces the driver's eye contact with other road users.

A holistic strategy gives the design a language deeply rooted in the brand, rather than depending on skeuomorphic design cues of the past. This is the key to designing the future and to evolve a brand into a new era.

THE END OF MEANINGLESS ADVERTISING

Today's cluttered media environment and inflationary formats have broken down communication to the least common denominator. Paradoxically, in an environment where a specifically targeted audience is watching, there is often no more than a generic idea and the announcement "the new XYZ," featuring an image of the car.

In addition, the digital age pushes the boundaries of classic communication formats. Augmented reality turns the user into an integral part of the brand experience, requiring new levels of compelling interaction.

A holistic strategy gives communication the same strategic platform as the brand and product – a strong meaning, which is the essential ingredient for the most fascinating stories to be told.

A HOLISTIC STRATEGY – THE FIRST STEP TO A LONG-TERM COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

In the last century, the automobile evolved from a full-fledged means of transportation to a symbol of personal freedom.

Today, this concept is challenged by sustainability requirements and urbanization. At the same time, it is transformed by digitalization and AI. While mobility as a commodity naturally progresses into an emission-free, autonomous age, the efforts to rationalize the car – one of the most emotional products – feel more like sacrifice than improvement. The necessary evolution has to occur emotionally, advancing the respective brands' meanings with more desirable, more personal experiences – the greatest opportunity since their founding.

The key to this transition is a holistic strategy that provides a coherent perspective for the brand, the product, and the communication beyond a specific technology. Its timeless context gives the brand momentum to shape its future without living off its past.

In relation to Darwinism, a holistic strategy is the favorable trait that enables the dominating brands of the petrol era not only to survive but to advance in the new era of mobility.

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