



## Auto-branding: beyond trans-portion...to trans-formation

*By Yannis Kavounis*

Cars are so much more than just a means of transportation. In our society, they have been transformed into symbols –both realistic and aspirational- of specific lifestyles, socio-economic backgrounds and even specific human personalities. They play the role of a “societal code,” which, when decoded, reveals the owner’s lifestyle, life-stage status, employment, aspirations and dreams. As a result, it is no surprise that car brand names carry significant value, placing the industry close to luxury brands and perfumes in terms of the importance of intangible aspects of a product/company.

Was it always like this though? In the beginning of the previous century, at a time when mass production ruled and ‘branding’ was far less sophisticated than it is today, many of the carmakers around the world were building their brands. They were developing names and landmarks for their companies, letting the world know what their cars stood for. But, what really did their brands stand for? From the four rings of Audi to the coined word Lexus, the mythical heroes of Ferrari and the direct communication of Jaguar, behind each logo and name there is a history and a reason for its existence. A history which proves that for generations automakers have recognized the power of their products to go beyond functionality and become symbolic expressions of our society.

There is a lesson to be learned here. So, let’s take a ride in the realms of automotive history and discover how cars were imbued with aspirational and emotional branding elements, elevating the product far beyond its initial purpose of existence.

### ▪ *Alfa Romeo – Could it be “Alpha”?*

A.L.F.A., an all-Italian venture established in 1909, stood for Anonima

Lombarda Fabbrica Automobili (Automotive Maker of Lombardy SA). Coincidence or not, the name clearly communicated first-class, strength and quality through its association with the first letter of the Greek alphabet. In 1918, the name was changed to Alfa Romeo after Nicola Romeo, a Neapolitan industrialist, took over its direction. The new name represented an interesting integration of the old name equity and the vision of the company's new owner. The Alfa Romeo logo has its roots in Italian history: it is inspired by the coat of arms of the Visconti Family, a powerful Milanese dynasty, which in turn supported the notion of strength and quality.



▪ **BMW – The propeller of freedom**

BMW's logo can be subtly associated with an airplane propeller, while the blue color represents the sky. The reason behind the sky reference is the fact that BMW was manufacturing engines for military planes prior to making cars, but the end result is far from that: inspiring emotions of freedom, achievement and success are evident. The Bayerische Motoren Werke name (aka BMW) says exactly what it is: the Bavarian Automotive Production.



▪ **Porsche – History reinvented**

Ferdinand Porsche founded the Porsche Engineering office in Stuttgart in 1931, laying the foundation for Porsche AG. The infamous Porsche horse is the emblem of the city of Stuttgart. The stripes and horns were borrowed from the coats of arms of a powerful dynasty in Stuttgart. All elements are perfectly orchestrated to communicate endless strength and quality.



▪ **Daihatsu – The three-wheel pioneer**

One of the oldest Japanese carmakers, it initially carried the name of its founder and owner: Hatsudoki Seizo Co. Ltd. It wasn't until 1951 that the company underwent a drastic transformation which led to the name Daihatsu Koguo Co. Ltd. (Osaka Generator Manufacturer). The



triangle shape of its logo is most likely a reminiscent of the three-wheel vehicles that the company was know for in the early 1900's.

▪ **Ferrari – Strong as a prancing horse**

An attribute of the car or just the emblem of Italy's only World War I flying ace? Actually, both! According to history, it took several attempts until the Baracca family convinced the founder of the company, Enzo Ferrari, to use the family's crest as the company's logo. The Prancing Horse became official in 1932, while the yellow background was later added to honor Modena –as yellow is the city's historic color.



▪ **FIAT – Filling the spaces between the letters**

An acronym that stands for Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino, i.e. Italian Automobile Factory of Turin. The logo was the creation of Fiat's design department. The myth has it that it was inspired by the shadow you can see between the letters when exposed in dark light.



▪ **Chrysler – The wings of inspiration**

For Walter Chrysler, the production of his first car in 1924 –the Chrysler Six- was a dream come true. Its logo went through several transformations throughout time but always stayed true to its essence: the silver wings along with the golden seal always have -and always will- stand for power, quality and the ground breaking engineer.



▪ **Saab – Mythical monsters**

Svenska Aeroplan Aktiebolaget was Sweden's national manufacturer of military aircrafts. The logo was inspired by the figure of a Swedish mythical monster to express the power and tradition of excellence of its cars.



▪ **Opel – oh!**

Its logo is a silver flash inside a ring as a subtle reminder of the speed and power of the German-made cars. The ring also represents the letter "O," the first letter of the company's founder, Adam Opel... coincidence? Maybe, but it is surely a clear communicator of openness, freedom and



connectivity.

▪ **Nissan – everyday reliability**

The first Datsun –the father of today’s Nissan Motor Co.- was built in 1914. Although the logo is visually similar to Opel’s symbol, its history is quite different; it symbolizes the “carmaker of the rising sun.” The name translates in English as “daily output” probably communicating the “everyday” functionality of the Nissan cars.



▪ **Volkswagen – people wanted... not drivers**

In English the name would translate into something like “People’s Car.” A strategically chosen name to communicate the company’s mission: building affordable and reliable cars for every man.



▪ **AUDI – Listen attentively**

In 1932, four automakers, Audi, Horch, DKW and Wanderer partnered to create one automaker giant. The logo of the partnership -- four silver rings-- represented the unbreakable unity amongst the four companies. The origin of the name is somewhat more complicated.



Horch Automobil-Werke GmbH was established in 1909, after August Horch stepped out of A. Horch & Cie Motorwagen-Werke AG –the first Horch company. Horch lost the legal dispute with the first company, over the name. However, a solution to the problem was found: his new company was named after the Latin translation of his name (Horch = audi in Latin, which translates into ‘hark’ in English).

▪ **Jaguar – simple and direct**

A creation that comes closer to today’s branding practices. The name and logo are a true expression of the company’s values: agility, grace, power and sophistication.



▪ **Rover – The bold and the strong**

The British always had a tradition of travel and exploration and so the name and logo of the company were invented:



rover, a vehicle used in exploring the terrain of a planet, supported by the Viking's boat in the background, as a symbol of boldness, strength and quest.

▪ **Volvo – re-ROLL-volution**

In Latin, *volvo* means “to roll,” most likely a strong reminder of what a car is supposed to do.

Yes, a car *is* supposed to roll and not “not go,”

like the infamous Chevy Nova. Volvo borrowed its

logo from the generally accepted symbol of steel – a clear statement of Sweden's dominance in the steel industry.



▪ **Mitsubishi – Diamonds are forever**

Yataro Iwasaki started his own shipping company in 1870 under the name of Tsukumo Shokai. The

logo was inspired by the propeller of a ship: a

three-diamond shaped propeller. The name was

changed to Mitsubishi Shokai in 1874. The

company's emblem was the source of inspiration

for this name, which means “three diamonds.”



▪ **Mercedes – Graceful star**

Mercedes was registered as a trademark on June 23,

1902, named after Emil Jellinek's daughter. He was

an enthusiastic businessman who got early involved

with car racing and promotion. Mercedes is a Spanish

name meaning “grace.” Following up to a successful

trade name, the logo was born: initiated by the company founder's sons,

the three-pointed stars represent Mercedes' ambition of universal

motorization “on land, on water and in the air.”



▪ **Lexus – Simply luxurious**

Lexus, the latest and surely most luxurious child of

Toyota, was established in 1983. Both name and logo

were conceived with one intention: to clearly

communicate luxury and superior quality.



▪ **Mazda – Lord of light**

Created by Ray Yousimara, the silver wings of the logo

symbolize Mazda's creativity, speed, flexibility and



aesthetics. The company was named after Ahura Mazda, the Zoroastrian lord of light, creator of the universe, according to the Mazdaznan faith. The name is also close to Matsuda, the founder of the company.

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