

Chalk Dust from the Schoolhouse Floor

The Unfortunate EDSEL

We've all had moments we'd rather forget, haven't we? Well, it can be the same for large corporations. In 1954-55, for instance, a couple of things happened that the Ford Motor Company has pretty much erased from the corporate recall. The first was Henry Ford II's decree that Ford-Mercury-Lincoln should take on GM's five price classes with two more of its own. The second was Francis C. "Jack" Reith's triumphal homecoming from Europe after having marketed an ailing Ford France to SIMCA.

Mr Reith, who had come to the company in '46 among "Tex" Thornton's Pentagon "whiz kids," re-emerged just as the assault on the General was getting underway. He was the corporate hero of the moment and everyone was eager to hear his thoughts. He, in turn, was eager to share them.

Contrary to earlier thinking, Jack suggested that there be only one new nameplate, with a smaller model below Mercury and a larger one above. That smoothly-presented bad idea was aggravated when, after a year-long study— and strong resistance from the Ford family— Edsel Ford's name was selected for the new badge. The old hands must have spotted the missing track but nobody dared try to stop the train.

But wait! Before we laugh too hard at this foolishness, consider the America of a half-century ago: In those days the Future was here! America had just (again) made the World Safe for Democracy and Commerce, we had more pocket money than we'd had since the '20s, gasoline was cheap and plentiful, auto sales were brisk and the European and Japanese invasions weren't yet specks on the horizon. Yes, Detroit was still the only automotive game in town and Real Americans were dazzled by every chrome-laden creation they could dream up. What could possibly go wrong? No, Folks, the basic concept was probably OK for those days; it's just that Ford's execution was, shall we say, shaky.

As the project gathered steam, then, a small cadre of people (except Jack Reith himself; he went to Mercury) were dragged more or less kicking and screaming from their various Ford divisions to develop, introduce and market the new line. From the moment they left, their former outfits fought the Edsel with everything they had. Considering the internal opposition, it's really amazing that Job One ever hit the street. But Hank Deuce and the Board kept pushing.

So in August of 1957, following just two years' development and many enticing publicity leaks, the much-heralded 1958 Edsel was introduced. The unveiling was pure star-studded theater (or, rather, TV), with record-breaking mountains of hype over these "all-new" cars. Why, they featured such ultra-modern advances as "Teletouch" gear-selection pushbuttons in the center of the steering wheel, self-adjusting brakes, loads of power-assisted options and captivating new styling! Who could resist?

Well, most people, as it turned out. The new division had worried over how they'd be able to ramp up production to meet the gigantic demand (they'd expected 200,000 for 1958), but that would never be a problem: the buyers stayed away in their great hordes. Fewer than 62,000 '58 Edsels sold.

What went wrong? Well, to start with, the Edsel Ranger and Pacer were placed between Ford and Mercury, and the Edsel Corsair and Citation— plus a station wagon— between Mercury and Lincoln, which totally confused potential customers. (Heck— it confuses *me!*) Their low-end prices overlapped those of Ford, and in the middle they completely blanketed Mercury. Only at the high end did the top Edsel Citation come in below the lowest Lincoln price tag. This sparked instant, brutal competition between Ford's own lines, which spread the internal hostility from within Dearborn through the F-M-L dealers nationwide. Ford's ill-planned methods for selecting Edsel dealers only stoked those fires.

Worse, despite all the hype, the cars were little more than rebodied Fords and Mercurys, styled as if by committee. And at just the crucial moment most of the 1958 Edsels didn't even come off their own assembly lines; they had to share capacity with Ford and Mercury plants. That cut into those brands' productivity ratings, producing not only more unrest, but major build quality problems as well. Then, by unfortunate coincidence, the new car hit the showroom right in the middle of a sharp recession.

Quality problems? Well, yes, there were quite a few: So many in fact that the quality inspectors took to merely writing lists of defects for the dealers to fix after they received the cars. (Since Edsel was only “renting” capacity to build the things, they hadn't much other choice.) Of course this sewed a certain level of discontent, until finally the dealers started mailing the bummers back to Dearborn. There Ford had to set up Detroit's only “disassembly line” to repair Edsel glitches. This did nothing for the marque's already dubious image.

In 1959 Pacer and Citation disappeared and sales got even worse, though by then Edsel had its own production lines, quality and styling were somewhat improved and the transmission pushbuttons had magically evolved into the familiar steering column lever. There was a restyled Edsel for 1960 (it looked a little like a Pontiac rear-ended by a Ford Galaxie) but production ended before that year actually arrived. Slightly over 109,000 Edsels were built in all. We've never found an official total of Ford's losses on the endeavor, but an industry authority at the time guessed it topped \$350 million, or a bit over a billion in today's dollars.

Apart from Edsel collectors here and there, probably the only winners were the new Falcon, which inherited the Edsel's production lines, and authors of business texts who were handed one of the greatest horror-story case studies of the 20th Century. The next-biggest loser may have been the reputation of Edsel Ford, a very fine man. He had died in 1943; wouldn't have been caught dead with his name on such a project, but he was. For many years “Edsel” was just another word for “fiasco.”

And the biggest loser? Well, just after the last of the Edsels was built, Jack Reith, no longer with Ford, was found at home with a large hole in his chest. He might have had an accident while cleaning the shotgun; no one ever knew for sure. Perhaps he just couldn't forget.

– The Ol' Schoolmaster

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