

Does the automotive “family face” strategy make sense?

Car models styled like Russian nesting dolls may be a thing of the past.

By: Gustavo Henrique Ruffo

At the 2012 Paris Motor Show, I had the chance to speak to Walter de Silva at a Volkswagen Night event. The company had just presented the Audi A3 Sportback and the new Seat Leon, and it seemed as though VW as a whole was introducing many other new cars that looked very similar to each other.

At the time, I questioned de Silva about it and he was very defensive. He was almost overreacting, as if he were in a huge conflict between what he really wanted to say and what he was supposed to say.



It seems many other automakers have put themselves in the same situation. The effect is something many refer to as “Russian Doll” cars, which is a reference to the “Matryoshka dolls” or “nesting dolls” that fit one inside the other. It seems to be a trend, but has this “family face” strategy gone too far? We’ve spoken to some key people in the industry to try to answer this question.

First of all, it is important not to confuse similar cars from different segments with overall brand identity. The latter is that thing that makes you say one car is from a very specific brand without having to look at its badges, and it’s a crucial aspect of the modern car industry.

“It happens not only to cars,” says Fernando Morita, coordinator of the “One Year Automotive Design” at IED (Istituto Europeo di Design) Sao Paulo. “According to Chico Homem de Melo, “The increasing diversity of brands on the market, as well as the higher segmentation of publics with which these brands interact, create a demand for a more emotional bond between them and their clients.”

Chinese carmakers have recently started to grasp the importance of a solid brand identity. Chery, for example, has hired Sergio Loureiro, Hakan Saracoglu, and James Hope. Loureiro has worked for BMW, PSA, General Motors, and Mercedes-Benz. Saracoglu has worked on such projects as the Porsche 918 Spyder, Boxster, and Cayman. Hope, meanwhile, was once the chief designer at Ford, and he is considered the father of the fifth-generation Mustang.

Korean carmakers have been there, too. Some have followed a similar path by hiring successful designers with impressive resumes. Kia made waves in 2006 by hiring Peter Schreyer, no less than one of the most successful designers of all time. He is one of only three designers ever to earn an honorary doctorate from the Royal College of Art in London – the other two being Sergio Pininfarina and Giorgetto Giugiaro. Schreyer also spoke to us about the family face strategy.



“I always tell that to my designers when we have that sort of discussion: if that was easy, anyone would be able to do it. It is a matter of strategy. I would not like to comment on other people’s work, especially as a competitor, but yes, it is dangerous to have all cars look the same. We have always pursued cars with a personality. The Stinger will be easily recognizable as a Kia, for example. You can recognize a Kia Rio from our other models. Anyway, if I had to choose, I’d rather have something recognizable.”

Schreyer is one designer who has managed to create a brand identity without compromising the personality of his company’s vehicles. “This was the one thing I put in my agenda. We needed a facial expression for Kia’s cars, a signature of the brand. And I came up with the Tiger Nose.” Said Schreyer. “Now we make variations of it: thinner, thicker, wider... It was presented in my first concept, the Kia Kee (from the 2007 Frankfurt Motor Show)”

But he balances that with a need to have a recognizable brand identity. “We are still building up our heritage,” says Schreyer. “We are a young company. We have been developing a design heritage for only ten years. Heritage makes things more challenging, for sure, but we want to develop design elements that are instantly recognizable, such as a Hofmeister kink in BMW sedans.” In other words, it may be easier to make cars with innovative styling if you have no legacy to cling to, but that does not mean the past prevents new elements from emerging. According to Schreyer, “It would be a mistake to ignore heritage. It is a strong element of identity.”



Luiz Alberto Veiga worked with Schreyer from 2005 until Kia took the German designer from the Volkswagen group. Both of them worked at the Volkswagen Design Center Potsdam, in Berlin. At the end of 2016, Veiga retired as the Package and Design director of Volkswagen for South America, and since then has felt free to express himself in a way Walter de Silva could not do in 2012.

In his opinion, a successful design strategy depends more on the organization chart than on the drawing talents of the design team.

“It is very difficult work. There’s the risk of getting all cars looking the same and it is a limitation for designers. Achieving good results is subject to a decision structure in which the chief designer is very well positioned in the company hierarchy. Ideally, the chief designer should be above the head engineer, reporting directly to the president. He is the ultimate instance regarding design decisions. Peter, for example, is on the same level as the president at Kia. So even the president cannot question Schreyer’s decisions,” says Veiga.

Companies with a structure other than this tend to make things more complicated for the design teams, which have to follow orders and do as they are told instead of creating original projects, according to the Brazilian designer. “Everything is easier when you have a clean sheet of paper in front of you. Volkswagen, for example, is a company with lots of tradition and an extremely complicated decision chain. As an experienced designer, I used to limit myself to follow the parameters and decisions taken at product meetings in Germany. At the beginning it was very difficult and we had internal and external criticism about the results. Today, on the other hand, this concept has already settled down and the work is flowing much better, with a lot more freedom.”



Veiga’s point of view is supported by John Jullens, principal with Strategy&, PwC's strategy consulting team. “We are talking about large global companies, which operate obviously all over the world. It becomes an organizational task laying out the design and development process and really defining who gets to say what and at what point. Who gets to have input into certain decisions. You just have to find the right balance between all these different groups. So we did a project a few years ago around this problem. It was all about helping in the development process of a car and also on the steps of this process. We had to come to a consistent branding that is good for the vehicle and consistent to the brand positioning. It was a challenge.”

When that "balance" is not attained, you may end up with very similar cars. Or with badge engineering. “Brands stand for some values: better handling, luxury and so on,” says Jullens. “And they are very good at communicating what they stand for. But there are certain segments that are interesting, or that are becoming more important, but to which these brands cannot stretch. So the companies create new brands to tackle these markets. This is more or less what cars do in a micro level. I am now in Detroit, where we had the badge engineering days. They just rebadged very similar vehicles. That clearly does not work. Customers are very demanding. There are more clever ways to deal with engines, components and platforms. Volkswagen has been very successful in doing that, but maybe they were not that successful in differentiating each vehicle,” says Jullens.

If you consider that Volkswagen was the best-selling carmaker in 2016, and that Mercedes-Benz is the leader among premium brands, exaggerating the family face strategy may seem to pay off, but that is exactly the opposite. “Mercedes-Benz was a company that was dependent on the S-Class and E-Class, with

clients in their late 60s," Jullens reminds us. "That was clearly not sustainable. So they have made sportier vehicles, SUVs... Daimler has done a really good job at rejuvenating the brand. They have maintained the core around sedans, but have expanded into other segments," says Jullens.

Strictly speaking, expanding into new segments may be the key to success, much more than the design strategy, as well as adopting modular platforms and other scale-favorable actions.

It would be interesting to meet Walter de Silva again. He is currently teaching Car Design Culture at the Scuola del Design at Politecnico di Milano, in Italy. We would ask him the same question we did back in 2012, but we're fairly sure that, with the lens of the last five years and freedom from the corporate structure, we would get a much different answer.