Continuity as a principle: The philosophy of Ferdinand Porsche

27/11/2025 Around the turn of the twentieth century, engineer Ferdinand Porsche established a technological and entrepreneurial philosophy that is still consistently pursued to this day. The company owes its long-term success to staying true to its origins.

The Porsche story was electric from the very beginning. Around the turn of the twentieth century, Ferdinand Porsche built his first electric and hybrid vehicles.

Today – 150 years after the birth of the company founder on September 3, 1875 – this story is more alive than ever: with a trio of efficient combustion engines, innovative plug-in hybrids, and fully electric models.

As a technological pioneer and as an entrepreneur, Ferdinand Porsche was setting new standards from an early age, paving the way for designs and principles that would shape the company's development. What began with him would continue with his son Ferry, who, in 1948, unveiled the first car to bear the family name – the 356 "No. 1" Roadster. Since the first 356, the sports car manufacturer has been

inextricably linked with the name Porsche – a continuity that has become one of the cornerstones of its success.

The young engineer set about working on innovative drive technologies before the end of the nineteenth century. His name drew international acclaim in 1900 at the Paris Exposition, when he presented an innovative electric car – the System Lohner-Porsche – powered by wheel-hub motors.

The designer went a step further with the idea of combining electric and combustion engines. Later that year, the Lohner-Porsche Semper Vivus (always alive) became the world's first functional full-hybrid car. He went on to further develop this concept: The Lohner-Porsche Mixte would be the first production model to demonstrate how hybrid drive technology could be suitable for everyday use.

However, the technology did not become widely accepted until more than 100 years later. In 2010, with three different hybrid vehicles, the sports car manufacturer revived its founder's legacy with the concept of "Intelligent Performance."

With all-electric models like the Taycan and Macan Electric, as well as variants with high-efficiency hybrid drives and combustion engines, the sports car manufacturer has since continued on the road to the future of mobility.

Early foundations: Porsche DNA

From the very beginning, Ferdinand Porsche was convinced that innovation and increased efficiency were accelerated by competition. He fixed shortcomings in performance by minimizing air resistance and keeping the weight as low as possible. A good example of lightweight design is the Austro-Daimler ADS-R "Sascha": the racing version of the small car planned by Porsche in collaboration with its patron Alexander ("Sascha") Joseph Graf Kolowrat-Krakowsky. Four prototypes debuted at the Targa Florio in 1922, an exciting race held on the public roads of Sicily. Two of them secured a double victory in their class at the first attempt. Soon after, the engineer moved to Daimler-Motoren-Gesellschaft in Stuttgart – a big step in both his professional and private life. During his time at Daimler, too, he did not miss the opportunity to travel to Sicily for the Targa Florio. In 1924, the Mercedes SSK compressor car designed under his direction finished in a respectable third place in the "1,501 to 2,000 cc engine capacity" category.

"In recognition of his outstanding achievements in motor car construction in general and in particular as the designer of the winning car of the 1924 Targa Florio," Württembergische Technische Hochschule awarded Ferdinand Porsche an honorary doctorate in engineering on June 4, 1924. The title "Dr. Ing. h.c." is still proudly carried in the company name to this day.

The high-powered compressor technology was invented by Paul Daimler. Porsche successfully took it a step further. This reflects another key trait of the designer – he typically did not invent pioneering technologies himself, but had the providence to identify the right innovations and then refine them

together with a highly skilled team. Half a century later, a direct analogy can be drawn with how turbo technology is used at Porsche. The technology was not invented within the company (the first patent dates back to 1905), but it was refined and made viable under the guidance of Ferdinand Porsche's grandson, Ferdinand Piëch, in the 1970s. First for motorsport with the 917, then for series production with the 911 (930) Turbo – true to the principle of "from the track to the road." From the outset, this technology transfer was central to the company founder's way of thinking – and it remains a cornerstone of the brand philosophy to this day. Since 1974, the Turbo has traditionally marked the pinnacle of each 911 generation.

A family creates history

The once-planned series version of the ADS-R "Sascha" embodies the vision of a compact, lightweight car for the general public. As early as the 1920s, Porsche wanted to bring mobility to everyone: an affordable vehicle with space for the entire family. He was inspired by this idea for decades and he eventually attempted to make it a reality by setting up his own engineering office together with his son-in-law Anton Piëch and Adolf Rosenberger from Pforzheim. It was entered in the commercial register in Stuttgart on April 25, 1931 – in the middle of a major economic crisis.

Sustainable success can only be achieved with a dedicated team. When he founded the engineering office, Porsche brought together a group of leading technicians and engineers. Almost all of them followed him from his former places of work. Many of them remained associated with the entrepreneur and the company for the rest of their lives. Karl Rabe, for example, who first met Ferdinand Porsche at Austro-Daimler in 1913. Rabe initially served as Chief Designer in the new engineering office in Stuttgart, before becoming an authorized signatory and finally CEO. He was a trusted advisor of Ferry Porsche up until his death in 1968. Engine specialist Josef Kales also originally came from Austro-Daimler; and, likewise, Franz Xaver Reimspieß, who had started out there as an errand boy at the age of 15.

Body designer Erwin Komenda followed Porsche from Steyr. He remained Chief Designer in the body department until his death in 1966. Integrating the family was also crucial for the company. Ferdinand Porsche involved his son Ferry in his work from an early age. Ferry was inspired by his father's creative powers. "He was always able to see beyond the horizon," he later recalled. "He always created cars that were ahead of their time."

Visionary designs

Wanderer, a manufacturer based in Chemnitz, was one of the engineering office's first clients. Among others, a mid-range car was developed, which subsequently went into series production as the Wanderer W21/22. Development orders from other manufacturers for chassis and steering elements followed. On August 10, 1931, Porsche applied for a patent for its torsion bar suspension. This was a technological milestone and is still used in automotive construction today.

An order from the motorcycle manufacturer Zündapp in 1932 gave Ferdinand Porsche the opportunity to work on a passion project – the development of a compact car. With the five-cylinder radial engine in the rear and a streamlined body, the Type 12 now looks like a precursor to the Volkswagen car subsequently known as the Beetle. With the Type 32 created for NSU, the designers then developed the first car with a boxer engine in the rear.

A breakthrough came in spring 1933 with an order from Auto Union: Porsche was to design an innovative sports car. The legendary Auto Union "Silver Arrow" had a 16-cylinder engine installed directly behind the driver, ensuring optimal weight distribution. This design approach is still successful in motorsports today – and has played an important role throughout the history of Porsche, featuring in models like the 550 Spyder, 914, Boxster, and the Carrera GT super sports car.

The compact car project continued in 1934, when Porsche was commissioned by the Reich Association of the German Automobile Industry to design and build a Volkswagen. The concept of the car was based on a modern, streamlined body with four seats and a four-cylinder boxer engine in the rear. After the Second World War, the powertrain layout was implemented in millions of Beetle cars and also became the basis for the 356 and 911 sports cars. This technical constant remains part of the brand identity today and is one of the reasons for the continuous appeal of the 911 throughout the world.

In the mid-1930s, the engineering office also became a development and testing facility. The first prototypes were built in the garage of the Porsche estate in the Killesberg area of Stuttgart. However, a lot more space would soon be needed. In May 1937, the company acquired a site of around three hectares in the Zuffenhausen district and built its first plant there – this is the nucleus of today's Porsche AG. In the years after the Second World War, the son began to realize his vision of a sports car – the basis for the 356. With the support of the team of Ferdinand Porsche, he managed to strategically develop the company in Stuttgart and expand the engineering office into an automobile manufacturer. This was the foundation stone for the global company as it is today.

This development ensured the long-term stability of the company and cultivated family values and traditions, which are still at the heart of the company culture. Today, addressing critical issues such as the role of Ferdinand Porsche during the period of National Socialism is also a matter of course and an ongoing task for the Porsche company.

The engineering office, founded in 1931, is considered to be the cradle of customer development at Porsche, which was consolidated into Porsche Engineering Group GmbH in 2001 and is based in the Development Centre Weissach. What initially began on a small scale is continued today at Porsche Engineering with around 1,700 employees at locations in Germany, Czechia, Romania, Italy, and China. The company's expertise has long extended beyond the pioneering disciplines of automotive development to incorporate functional and software topics.

The legacy of Ferdinand Porsche lives on in the year of his 150th birthday – as modern and as future-oriented as on the very first day.

Info

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