Conceiving Color

25/05/2018 The new Porsche 911 GT3 RS: Peak speed 312 kmh. This Porsche is green. Why is that?

If you pose the question on the left to Barbara Sika and Daniela Miloševi, their first response will be a knowing smile. The two designers develop paint colors for new Porsche models and derivatives. “The 911 GT3 RS pushes the limits of what's technically possible, so it also needs a cutting-edge color,” Sika explains. “We match the color precisely to the character of the car,” says Miloševi, adding that “the color should be like a superb article of clothing that perfectly highlights the car's qualities.” So for the 911 GT3 RS, they chose a vibrant shade of green with a hint of yellow. Developing colors also means coming up with the right names. The marketing department christened this shade “Lizard Green.” It's a perfect match, according to Sina Brunner, a product manager for innovation and color. “Lizard Green is a very extroverted color that expresses sportiness, agility, and nimbleness.” So it's an excellent fit for the new 911 GT3 RS. “Which,” as Sika observes, “is hardly a car you're going to hide if you're driving it.”

Whether future GT3 RS owners will flock to this unusual hue has yet to be seen. In fact, the designers are well aware that the color has the potential to polarize. And that's OK. What's more, it's even encouraged. That's because Lizard Green is not simply a color but what's known as a communication color. “By that we mean the precise hue that'll be used for a specific model in all of its marketing,” explains Sina Brunner, who coordinates design with sales. “This particular hue will feature in all product communications, starting with the world premiere and the initial advertising campaigns.” And pleasing people is by no means the most important job of a communication color. Instead, its main purpose is to accentuate the unusual and unique qualities of a Porsche and thereby attract people's attention. Brunner captures the point as follows: “The Lizard Green 911 GT3 RS is meant to catch your eye and draw you into the showroom.”

In order for this process to be successful, the color designers need to have their finger on the pulse of current trends—and possess extraordinary visionary skills. That's because it takes years to develop a new color of paint—which also means a new communication color. One reason for this has to do with the extremely high demands that Porsche places on the quality of its paints. For example, new paints have to pass weathering tests in which they're applied to sheet steel and then set in the sun for twenty-four months straight.

Putting paints through their paces

Developers use these tests, which take place at specially equipped trial fields in desert regions, to ensure that a new paint color won't change in any way over time. In addition to weathering tests, new paints are subjected to other rigorous trials that assess their resistance to substances like saltwater or rim cleaners. It's also critical that the paint on high-performance sports cars like the 911 GT3 RS be highly resistant to impact from stones or other debris, because it tends to be subjected to these

conditions more often than other cars.

All of these development steps and test cycles take time. The designers generally adopt a three-step approach. They first look back at the car's history. “If you're not familiar with the past, you can't shape the future,” says Sika. The color experts therefore first analyze all the previous communication colors used for a particular car, from its very first version to its most recent incarnation. “If we want to give each derivative its own unique color, the new shade can't be too close to that of the previous model,” explains Miloševi.

Next, color designers come up with initial ideas and discuss them with their sales colleague Sina Brunner. Which colors reflect the car's character well, and which ones less so? The final step requires the designers to anticipate which colors will be popular when the new model actually comes onto the market some years later. “One important source of inspiration for us is the furniture industry, which also needs a long lead time for its colors,” says Miloševi. Of additional interest are the individual colors that Porsche customers order above and beyond the standard hues offered. The goal is for the latest generation to fit in well with Porsche's overall color range.

The team distills these different steps down to a proposal that identifies a potential shade with several nuances and effects, such as metallic paints or pearlescent pigments. The samples are applied to small pieces of sheet steel and discussed by a larger circle of experts, including specialists from production, technical development, design, sales, and marketing. “We use this larger forum to determine which color ideas are technically feasible in general,” Brunner explains. It's also important to consider, from the designers' perspective, all the materials that will be used elsewhere in the car. Because regardless of how well a color might be suited as an exterior paint, it ultimately has to harmonize with the leather, Alcantara, and other materials on the interior. Only after all of these questions have been answered can technical development work on the communication color begin.

How and why a particular color becomes fashionable can never be definitively explained. But one thing is clear: certain cycles keep recurring. The fashion industry usually sets the tone. Interior decorators then pick up on certain trends, followed by the furniture industry. “If you trace the history of certain colors over a period of decades you can see that trends reappear with surprising regularity,” notes Sika. A good example would be white, which was a very popular color for cars in the 1970s, but then became nearly taboo in the 2000s before enjoying a comeback in the 2010s. Today, it's particularly in vogue for electric cars—and when used as a communication color is meant to convey values like purity and environmental friendliness.

Given a name like Signal Yellow or Star Ruby, the color then enters a lifelong association with the car model for which it was developed. Its role is primarily restricted to marketing and communications, but not always. The predecessor model to the Porsche 911 GT3 RS was presented in Lava Orange, which was hugely popular in China and became one of the three favorite colors for Porsches there. This shows that under the right conditions, a communication color can become a bestseller. It doesn't have to please, but it's quite all right if it does.

Gallery

Text first published in the Porsche customer magazine Christophorus, No. 386

Link Collection

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