

# Tesla Motors

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## 6 **Executive Summary**

Tesla Motors, manufacturer of electrical cars, charging stations and large scale private and industrial batteries has in the seven years since the release of its first vehicle grown to become a considered an important player for the future. It has built a brand of social good, innovation, technology and disruption and it has done so explicitly without a marketing strategy and stands on the brink of disrupting a very large industry. This evaluation will look at how and why Tesla Motors has been able to grow at this very rate in a traditional and static market and how their lack of communication goes in to their overall rhetoric and strategy. The evaluation finds that Tesla Motors have been able to grow without external marketing efforts largely because the company has been producing the best and most innovative and interesting alternatives to gasoline-powered vehicles on the market and that they therefore have gotten the necessary press to communicate its core messages. Furthermore, Tesla Motors have a well established rhetoric due to its relation with its CEO Elon Musk and the fit of his ideology to the company's core goals to prove that electric cars can outperform their gasoline-powered counterparts. The company has seen setbacks and it has seen pockets of bad press. When these pockets occur, Tesla's strategy of no-strategy has the inherent flaw of not being able to balance the impressions of its target audience with their own message and counter information. For Tesla however, this communication strategy pulls the company away from the noise of commercial channels and makes the social media efforts and community building more authentic and helps Tesla stay truly intertwined with its audience and customers.

## 7 **Introduction**

Tesla Motors, founded in 2003 by Martin Eberhard and Marc Tarpenning, designs, produces and delivers electrical cars that currently is targeted mostly against the lower end of the upper general car market and where every new release is planned to move towards a cheaper price point (Musk, 2006; "About Tesla," n.d.). Beyond electric cars and charging stations for these, the company is also engaging in battery modules for load-shifting the power grid and storing solar and off-peak power as well as producing and having produced powertrains for other car manufacturers such as Toyota (Kanellos, 2014; Ramsey, 2014; "Explained: The Tesla Powerwall and What It Means for Australia's Energy Market," 2016). Tesla Motors currently produces two car models and is in the process of preparing a third model to be released to the markets in 2017 and, albeit growing, Tesla only holds tiny fraction of the global car market. Tesla Motors, under the chair and personal ethos of Elon Musk, carries a well reputed status as an innovative and progressive company that has set out to disrupt the global car market by introducing electrical cars that are able to compete with the gasoline competition (Dyer, Gregerson, & Nathan, 2015; Knight 2016; Stringham, Miller, & Clark, 2015). As the world is increasingly trying harder to combat global climate change, the oil-fueled and arguably static car market with large manufacturers delivering slow innovation on the fronts that matter has been prime for disruption for a longer period of time and this is the largely blue ocean of electrically powered cars that work Tesla Motors is set out to tap into (LeVine 2016). When it comes to communication and marketing strategy, Tesla Motors hold a no-strategy strategy

which makes it a interesting organization to look at purely due to its lack of explicit marketing efforts. In this evaluation of the marketing and communication strategy of Tesla Motors we will therefore also have to look a lot to the circumstances regarding the general image of Tesla Motors and its corporate efforts (McCarthy 2013; Chen 2016; Butterick 2015).

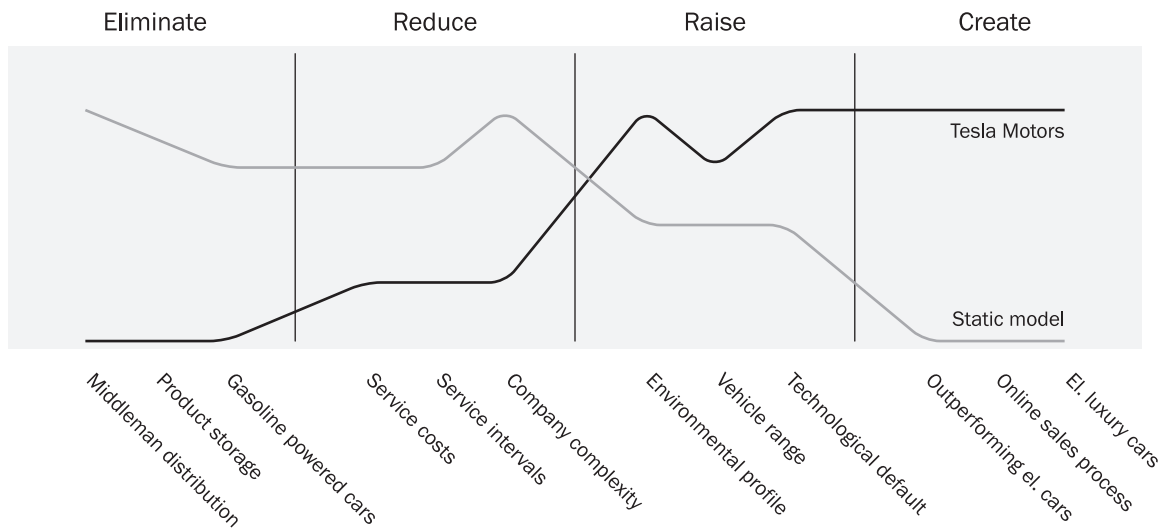
## 7.1 History

After being founded in 2003 in Silicon Valley, California and with the original plan to “prove that electric cars could be better than gasoline-powered cars,” Tesla Motors launched its first car in 2008. And while it was still mostly a business plan looking for venture capital, the company was presented for Elon Musk of PayPal, Solar City and SpaceX and the entrepreneur quickly came on board as co-founder and CEO. As an individual, Mr. Musk carries with him a very valuable ethos that we will discuss later on. Mr. Musk wrote in 2006 a post on Tesla’s blog named “The Secret Masterplan” which outlined its release strategy of three cars which all stem to make electric cars more and more available and affordable (Musk, 2006; Knight 2016; “About Tesla,” n.d.). After the release of the Roadster in 2008, which the former Vice President of General Motors credits as the leading factor for its Nissan Leaf and Chevrolet Volt programs which in turn is two of Tesla’s biggest competitors, Tesla Motors went on to release a new model in 2009 dubbed the Model S. The first vehicles of the Model S began shipping in 2012 and at the same time, the production of the Roadster was ended. (Schwartz 2011) For Q4 of 2015, Tesla’s sales volume reached 17,300 units and it geared up for the release of the next model aimed at families and as an all-round SUV, namely the Model X which was released in 2016. As Tesla Motors have grown from its one first model and a global share of absolute zero in 2008 it now holds 0,11% in the european car market and accounted for 30% of all electrical cars sold in the US this March and is growing tremendously in terms of overall sales (Motor Intelligence n.d.; “Tesla Model S European Sales Figures,” n.d.). For Q4 2015 and Q1 2016, Tesla have shown a decrease in sales volume and results below targets, but Tesla’s revenue is still growing. Tesla Motors does compete in the global market, but there are a few markets where different metrics make for their products to be especially attractive to the intended audience. We will get back to the specifics of these markets when we discuss the company’s target audience. As 2016 unfolds, Tesla Motors has met a number of incidents regarding fires and their autopilot system, and we can with this see some of the drawbacks of the current strategy in action (Dyer, Gregerson, & Nathan, 2015; Wieczner 2015; Tucker 2016).

## 8 Communication Strategy

As we look at this strategy, it is important to expand on how Tesla Motors is able to differentiate themselves from the immediate competition. To do this, we will briefly look at Kim & Mauborgne’s (2005) ERRC-grid (Eliminate, Reduce, Raise, Create) or Four Actions Framework and compare the value curve of Tesla Motors against its primary competitors. First and foremost, Tesla Motors is eliminating the middlemen of distribution, service centres

and storage space by making all cars to order and only having showrooms. In this, it also reduces service costs and intervals and the complexity of their structure. Tesla Motors also raises the environmental profile of the car industry, the range of electric cars compared to its competitors and technological baseline of its cars by providing an immense set of sensors and software as a default. Lastly, Tesla Motors has created a larger market for electric cars than what was already present by trying, and succeeding in better mimicking regular cars in terms of looks. It has with this also raised the attractiveness of electric cars (Kiley 2015; Knight 2016; Stringham, Miller, & Clark, 2015; Dyer, Gregerson, & Nathan, 2015).



When overlaying this curve with Volkswagen, Toyota, Nissan, and General Motors which all are huge car manufacturers and brands, all produce their own electric alternatives, and collectively account for about 36% of the global car market, Tesla Motors have positioned themselves to be an alternative not only in terms of power but also in terms of the complete sales process (Tesla Motors 2016; Fernbacher 2016). As Tesla Motors are eradicating the middlemen and external distributors and turning it's business mostly online, Tesla raises its own paucity by delivering a product that has Tesla controlling the flow from start to end and it does so with the added benefit of lowering costs and distribution chain. Going in to a Tesla showroom, is an experience designed by Tesla from start to end, just as Apple's stores are owned and managed, and they are able to present their products in a completely different way than the competition (Kiley 2015; Fernbacher 2016).

### 8.1 Target Audience

The models Tesla currently has on sale can all be considered relatively high end and luxurious, with base models ranging from AU\$100,000 and all the way up to AU\$200,000 for the Model S. At the same time, Tesla Motors bring in social, environmental and technological factors to further subset the target audience towards those who not only have necessary capital to pay a little extra for a new car but who also wants to care for the earth and for the environment. For its audience, Tesla plays into the sense of being the smart option that will

prevail the future. Their latest model, namely the Model 3 is targeted against the primary middle market and towards families and will be significantly less of a luxury item (“Model 3,” n.d.; “Order Your Tesla Model S,” n.d.). And once the regular costs of gasoline, subsidies and less maintenance due to fewer mechanical parts are accounted for, all of Tesla’s vehicles will in certain markets become cheaper options than their gasoline counterparts (Stringham, Miller, & Clark, 2015). What is then portrayed as rather luxurious items can then become affordable to a larger share of the audience and more of the coming buyers of new cars will be able to consider Tesla’s models purely on the basis of those being more environmentally friendly options and possibly cheaper in the long run. In Tesla’s largest overseas market, Norway, Tesla has held over 10% of the sales which is a direct result of the cars’ performance and of the cars being the subject of very heavy subsidizing by the Norwegian government strictly because of the all electric powertrain (Jolly 2015; “Tesla Model S European Sales Figures,” n.d.; Dubner 2014).

## 8.2 No Strategy

To Tesla’s primary markets of luxurious and environmentally conscious customers wanting something functional yet practical as well as forward thinking, the strategy of no-strategy and no explicit marketing efforts communicates to its own self. The strategy does in essence argue that their products are so good and attracting that Tesla Motors, valued at US\$ 31 billion needs a marketing budget of no more than zero. And while Tesla is present on free communication channels and mediums such as Twitter, Snapchat and Facebook, it does not use any money on producing or sending advertisements on broader commercial channels such as TV or print mediums (Zart 2014; Rutter 2014; Hull & Delevett, 2013). The company handles its sales mostly online, makes the vehicles to order and have complete control of the sales process and all the channels involved, and without paid marketing efforts does rely heavily on their online presence in order to communicate its message. Tesla’s social media presence and lack of marketing presence does also mean that the social efforts become more of an integral part of the overall rhetoric and is part in shaping their brand as a community. These mediums are very good for engagement and dialogue and it brings Tesla closer to its audience with little monetary effort on their part (Rutter 2014). We can hereby also see that a no-strategy strategy is not the same as no organized communication effort, but more to the fact that no money is spent on advertising through classic commercial channels that follow more of a top-down and a static one-way pattern of communication and that need to compete for the attention of the customer and potentially become part of the noise. All this does not mean that there aren’t any risks involved with not carrying its own efforts. First of all, the strategy or lack thereof means that there are only market spin as long as the company is in the media; the company is ever depending on being interesting for word-of-mouth and press to care for their message and the company to earn exposure. As Tesla is still a very hot item in regards to the environment, technology and innovative power, Tesla Motors has yet to experience this lack of PR on a larger scale, but it has on multiple occasions experienced situations of backlash

where bad results, incidents and resulting bad exposure colours the press which in terms colours the complete perception of Tesla because of their lean communication strategy (Kiley 2015; LeVine 2016; Knight 2016; Zart 2014). Relying so heavily on social media also has its own risk in that the audience of its communication will largely be users who have already subscribed to Tesla's communication and not as many of the general and potential audience as classic commercial channels would have (Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014). This involved risk has also caused some to explicitly critique Tesla Motors for their lack of a strategy, and this should come to no surprise; lack of strategy or of marketing efforts can easily be considered the same as leaving everything to chance as we can read out of the involved risk. This critique of their efforts is furthermore especially prevalent when the company delivers bad results or miss expectations, as has been a major issue in the last quarters of 2015 and the first of 2016. And while Forbes listed their 100 top innovative companies and Tesla on the top, Consumer Reports degraded Tesla's Model S's rating and the Tesla's lowering of production expectation cost the company US\$ 3 billion in market valuation (Wieczner 2015; LeVine 2016). One factor is in what regard the company is able to respond to critique but another is the how perception is built when one will rely mostly on external voices opining on actions rather than explicit communication by the company itself. The company is quick to respond to issues and incidents, and it does so by taking responsibility and action where necessary, but it gives a feel of having to be on the defensive more often because of its strategy.

#### 8.2.1 **Strategy-Image-Audience Fit**

When we now bring these facets of information together; Tesla's strategy, its target audience and the image its products and value curve portray, we can see clear benefits and relations between all of them when we strictly look at the customer relationship. The lack of a strategy will for Tesla Motors' audience and brand image carry the implicit understanding that it likens itself more with a social movement—which it in any absolute terms is not—but the mere idea is far from that of a classical marketing, commercial and capitalistic view that it is able to carry this conception. To the brand image, the strategy is then a very good fit and it is a image that its core audience of progressive customers wants to relate to. Following Arora's (2013) 8 P's of luxury brand marketing, we can see that Tesla's efforts are significantly strong on Performance, on Persona and on Placement. It does have a bit of tactical Paucity by being made to order, but not as much as very luxurious car brands such as Ferrari by the fact that there are no tactical limits to who can buy their vehicles. Tesla, as we have discussed are very specific about their Placement by being available solely online and in their showrooms. As the company move towards the release of the US\$35,000 Model 3, we can see a brand that is strongly connoted with being fairly luxurious being available to a more general audience. It is a clear indication to the demand and interest for outperforming electric vehicles when Tesla received an outstanding 300,000 pre-orders for the Model 3 in the week following its release (Richter 2016). This can of course in no sense be considered paucity, but we know from Mr. Musk and Tesla's plan that it has been their strategy to gradually shift towards this mass market positioning.

### 8.3 **The Rhetoric of a No-Strategy Strategy**

In terms of rhetoric, we can now say that Tesla's no-strategy strategy arguably ascertains to a number of different factors:

- As the company is a market disruptor, this strategy show to Tesla Motors' intrinsic assumption that it not only can change the market, but that it automatically will. It relates to environmental concerns that its products are part of the future of the car industry and nothing but
- This again show to a firm belief in its own product and that its product and process can stand on its own
- Given its positioning as environmental, technologically advanced and until the Model 3 is freely available, still as luxurious products, it is to Tesla's benefit that it maintains a level of paucity as it has done. With the release of the Model 3, Tesla will necessarily have to change parts of its rhetoric as it changes the scope of its targeting
- This strategy is not risk free, as we have discussed, but it gives a good fit towards the audience that it wants to attract

In terms of pathos Tesla's calls to the social effort of combating global climate change and their communication efforts through its no-strategy does, as we mentioned earlier engage as a community through social media rather than classical marketing channels. Again we see that a no-strategy is still a strategy as it still contributes to the communication of Tesla that it is not present on these channels albeit in an implicit rather than explicit way. If we look at Tesla's website we can also see artefacts of this strategy in that it serves as the platform to buy their products and not only present them well. We also do in this see that in keeping to this clearer need for a call to action, Tesla's website also cuts away a lot of the noise that is present on other manufacturers sites, especially when compared to Nissan, Chevrolet or Toyota's respective websites. There is an immediate call for Tesla, and its electric competitors being the logical option for the future. In contrast to its competitors, electric powertrains and storage is Tesla's only business and this part of their logos is therefore a lot more authentic in this regard.

### 8.4 **The Rhetoric of Elon Musk**

The natural spokesperson for the company's efforts is naturally its CEO, and which happens to be a very charismatic and almost philanthropic entrepreneur that is an expert on leveraging social media (Charles 2014). He has by Forbes been said to have inherited the late Steve Jobs mantra and to have grabbed Apple's crown of creativity (Dyer, Gregerson, & Nathan, 2015). Elon Musk's rhetoric and strong ethos, of success, creativity, ingenuity and social responsibility blends well into that of Tesla Motors and it does well in regards to strengthening its own rhetorical foundation. Both Mr. Musk and Tesla Motors share such a



clear vision of creating change for the world by innovation that the fact that they both live for money steps in to the shadows. The clear and strong external relationship between Elon Musk and Tesla also means that most coverage on Mr. Musk will carry the connotation of being coverage for Tesla Motors and any positive coverage of his efforts in HyperLoop, Solar City or SpaceX will contribute to the audience's perception of Tesla Motors (Charles 2014; Heath 2015).

## 9 **Conclusion**

Tesla Motors lack of a strategy for external communication and marketing efforts does mean that they have to rely evermore on their reputation and rolling rhetoric and communicated messages. It does also mean that Tesla is more prone to bad press than their competitors and it is therefore by no means a strategy without risk, but at the same time this also instils how much of an intrinsic belief the company has in the sales value of their own products and of their core mission. Tesla's products have become popular and the company more problems producing them fast enough rather than finding people to buy them—all without external paid marketing on ordinary commercial channels. Tesla's strong intrinsic relationship with its CEO is not unique, but given Mr. Musk's other engagements and the success of these, Tesla is strongly benefitting from the larger picture of Mr. Musk's rhetoric. Tesla's strategy works and the credit is partly due to this strong relationship and partly due to the power of the performance aspects of its products.

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