

Volkswagen: Organizational Evolution, Strategic Development and Leadership Dynamics

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ABSTRACT : In an increasingly dynamic business world, the long-term success of companies plays an important role. The key factors for a company's long-term survival are an effective management as well as a strategic vision and a good market position. These aspects are important for a company's success and also underline its resistance to changes in the industry and consumer demands. In particular, the corporate structure and the organization of the company itself are of central importance as the way in which a company operates has an immense influence on its overall performance. The automotive industry operates in a dynamic environment that is constantly changing because of technological advances and new consumer demands. In this context, Volkswagen AG is an interesting research subject that offers insights into the complex dynamics of leadership, strategies, market positioning and the organization of a company.

KEYWORDS: Volkswagen; Strategy; Organization; Leadership

I. THE COMPANY

History : The origins of Volkswagen AG go back to 1934, when the "Reichsverband der Deutschen Automobilindustrie", the association of the German automotive industry, commissioned Ferdinand Porsche to design the Beetle with the aim of producing a "people's car" with a low price, low maintenance costs and a low fuel consumption. In 1937 the company for the preparation of the car was founded on the initiative of the German Labor Front and got renamed as Volkswagen GmbH in 1938. The development of the Beetle is a symbol of Volkswagen's commitment to innovation and accessibility in the automotive industry. Despite the interruptions caused by the Second World War, the Beetle gained worldwide popularity and became a cultural icon, shaping the company's image and setting the stage for its international expansion. In the 1950s, Volkswagen expanded its factory capacities and initiated rationalization offensives, making it possible to mass-produce the Volkswagen saloon and the Transporter. The combination of mass production and internationalization of the company consolidated Volkswagen's global presence and formed the basis for a longterm growth strategy. Volkswagen established production facilities in various countries and developed into one of the most important players in the automotive market. Around 60 percent of production was sold to other European countries and the USA. In order to strengthen its competitive position, Volkswagen negotiated cooperation opportunities with Daimler-Benz AG and eventually took over Auto Union in the 1960s, which diversified the automobile company's portfolio. At the end of the 1960s, Volkswagen faced a crisis caused by changes in currency policy and thus sales problems on the international market. Sales figures fell and the Beetle lost popularity, particularly in the American market.

From 1976 onwards, the Volkswagen AG was able to increase its sales again and had overcome the crisis. In the following decades, Volkswagen grew through strategic acquisitions and technological advances. In the 1980s and 1990s, Volkswagen further expanded its brand portfolio and acquired Seat and Škoda, among others. In addition, this era was characterized by technological innovation, as Volkswagen introduced groundbreaking advances in engine technology and safety features. In the global economic crisis in 1992/93, the company made some strategic changes and focused more on increasing product diversity and managing labor productivity and profitability. This enabled the company to protect itself from massive sales declines during the economic crisis. However, the diesel emissions scandal in 2015 presented Volkswagen with a major challenge that had far-reaching consequences for the company's reputation and financial situation. This crisis prompted Volkswagen to thoroughly reassess its strategies and led to a fundamental change in its approach. In response, Volkswagen initiated a strategic transformation focusing on electrification, digitalization and sustainability, which demonstrate Volkswagen's commitment to sustainable mobility. This strategic transformation is still taking place today and Volkswagen is currently at the forefront of the automotive industry, focusing on technological innovation and environmental sustainability.

Current position : The Volkswagen Group is one of the world's leading automobile manufacturers with its head office in Wolfsburg, Germany. It operates globally and has 115 production plants in 19 European countries and 10 countries in North and South America, Asia and Africa. The Group employs around 676,000 people. The Group's vehicles are sold in over 150 countries. In 2022, the Volkswagen Group produced 8.717 million vehicles and achieved sales of 279.2 billion euros.

The company owns ten main brands from five European countries, which are organized into brand groups:

- the Core brand group with the Volkswagen brand, Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles, Škoda, Seat and Cupra,
- the Progressive brand group with Audi, Lamborghini, Bentley and Ducati and - the Sport Luxury brand group with Porsche.
- In addition to producing cars, the Group consists of a large number of other brands and business areas. These include for example trucks, financial services, leasing, banking, insurance and fleet management.
- The Board of Management of Volkswagen AG consists of nine members and is chaired by Dr. Oliver Blume, CEO of the Volkswagen Group.
- Volkswagen has established the following 7 core principles as its value foundation:
 - Responsibility
 - Sincerity - Courage - Diversity
 - Pride
 - Cohesion
 - Reliability

Based on these values and the promise to make mobility cleaner, quieter, smarter and safer with electric drive, digital networking and autonomous driving, Volkswagen wants to demonstrate its future orientation and ability to act as a globally operating Group.

II. SWOT ANALYSIS

	Strengths	Weaknesses
corporate analysis - internal	1) Strong brand portfolio 2) Global market presence 3) Synergy effects between brands 4) Brand tradition 5) Strong financial performance 6) Excellent employer	7) Reputation scandal 8) Complex organizational structure
environmental analysis - external	Opportunities	Threats
	9) Technological innovations & electric mobility 10) Focus on sustainability 11) Partnerships	12) Highly competitive corporate landscape 13) Regulatory changes 14) Technological disruption 15) Changing customer requirements

source: own figure

Strengths of Volkswagen

1. **Strong brand portfolio:** Volkswagen has the largest portfolio on the entire automotive market with brands like Audi, Porsche, Seat and Škoda. The large portfolio makes it possible to address different customer groups, which can be seen as a strength of Volkswagen.
2. **Global market presence:** Thanks to its global market presence, Volkswagen appeals to customer groups in large parts of the world and therefore has access to various markets. In total, Volkswagen sells vehicles in over 150 different countries.
3. **Synergy effects between brands:** As Volkswagen has many different brands such as Audi, Porsche, Seat and Škoda, knowledge and resources can be shared and developed together. In addition, it is possible to work together on innovations, which enables cost savings.
4. **Brand tradition:** Volkswagen has a long brand tradition, which has been characterized mainly by famous models such as the Beetle or the Golf. This brand tradition can be a strength and lead to a high level of customer loyalty, as these models stand for great reliability.
5. **Strong financial performance:** In 2022, Volkswagen AG generated total sales revenue of around 279.2 billion euros and an operating result of approximately 22 billion euros, which equates to 7.9% of sales revenue. Volkswagen therefore has a strong financial position in the automotive industry. This position can represent a strategic strength as it affects the company's stability and competitive advantage.
6. **Excellent employer:** According to Forbes, Volkswagen is ranked at the 41. position in the World's best employers list of 2023.

Weaknesses of Volkswagen

7. **Reputation scandal:** The diesel scandal represents a significant weakness for Volkswagen, as it has had a lasting impact on the company's reputation and consumer trust. The scandal has also led to a loss of sales.
8. Volkswagen had to pay more than 30 billion euros and it is an ongoing challenge to fully restore trust.
9. **Complex organizational structure:** Volkswagen has a complex organizational structure, especially because of its multi-brand portfolio and global business activities. Complex organizations can lead to potential challenges in decision-making. This can lead to both slower decision-making processes and more bureaucracy. Complexity can also make it more difficult to react quickly to changes in the market.

Opportunities of Volkswagen

10. **Technological innovations & electric mobility:** Volkswagen is working on technological innovations to drive forward electromobility and make progress in autonomous driving. In 2021, Volkswagen was the market leader in Germany for new electric car registrations but was overtaken by Tesla in 2022. Nevertheless, Volkswagen is one of the drivers of new innovations in the automotive industry and could further expand its market position by continuing to focus on technological innovations.
11. **Focus on sustainability:** Volkswagen can use its focus on sustainability as a strategic opportunity, especially as this topic is becoming increasingly important in society. By making efforts to focus on electromobility and thereby reducing CO2 emissions, Volkswagen is not only meeting social expectations but also attracting environmentally conscious consumers. This focus on sustainability strengthens the brand's reputation, which was harmed by the emissions scandal.
12. **Partnerships:** Volkswagen could gain a strategic advantage through partnerships, for example with technology companies, other car manufacturers or energy suppliers. Through these collaborations, Volkswagen could share resources and have access to new technologies that could promote innovation and drive technological progress in the automotive industry.

Threats of Volkswagen

13. **Highly competitive corporate landscape** : There is intense competition in the automotive industry, not only from established car manufacturers but also from upcoming manufacturers in the field of electromobility. This could have a negative impact on Volkswagen's market position. A high competitive pressure also increases the need for innovation and differentiation, which could result in high investments in research and development.

Regulatory changes

14. The dependence on regulatory changes by governments, such as changes to emission standards, can be a threat to Volkswagen and other competitors in the automotive industry, especially because they can have a significant impact on production operations and production costs.

Technological disruption

15. Technological disruptions could become a threat to Volkswagen, as there is a possibility that competitors could make a rapid progress in areas such as electromobility or autonomous driving. In order to maintain its market position, it is necessary to constantly adapt to new technologies and innovations and invest in R&D. In addition, there is always the possibility that a company will come up with a groundbreaking innovation that has little to no CO2 emissions.

This could disrupt the entire existing market.

Changing customer requirements

16. There is the possibility that current customer needs may change. In order to be able to take these into account, an ongoing market research is necessary. As the market dynamics in the automotive industry are rapidly changing and the issue of how to get away from CO2 emissions is very present at the moment, there is always the risk that the competition will adapt more quickly and customers will migrate to the competition.

III. PORTERS GENERIC STRATEGIES

In the 1980s, Porter presented his strategies for achieving a competitive advantage on the market.¹ Porter assumes that companies can only achieve relevant competitive advantages if they commit to one main strategic direction. According to Porter, attempting to pursue several strategies at the same time leads to the failure of the entire company. Porter identifies cost leadership, differentiation and focus as the three overarching strategies for further specialization and division into four strategies. The strategy of cost leadership simply says that a company needs to minimize production costs in order to offer the lowest price on the market to their customers. The basic idea behind the differentiation strategy is to provide your own products and services with specific features that competitors do not have. This makes the product unique and customers are generally willing to pay a higher price for these additional features, which they believe give the product greater value. In the focus strategy, the company concentrates on specifically defined market segments, product groups, customer groups or regions. Within these target segments, the company can either specialize on cost focus or differentiation focus. Focus strategies are typical niche strategies that allow the company to concentrate its competencies and know-how on a very specific area and thereby specialize.²

Cost leadership: In this strategy, Porter describes the strategy of a company to become the lowest-cost producer and thus offer customers the lowest price on the market. In order to produce its products at the lowest cost of all competitors, the company must focus on large scaling and so-called economies of scale in production. In addition to high productivity and low downtimes in production, lean production methods (e.g. just-in-time) and negotiating power are also fundamental to minimizing production costs, offering customers the lowest price available and still making a profit.

Cost Focus: Similar to the cost leadership strategy, the cost focus strategy aims to keep production costs and prices low for consumers. Here, however, a small, classic niche market is targeted. The niche can be differentiated, for example, by the geographical region or the size of the market (customer base).

¹Recklies (2000)

² Recklies (2000) and cf. Mintzberg (1988), pp. 1-67.

Differentiation focus : If companies decide to pursue this strategy, the company is usually in the luxury segment. Great value is placed on the highest product quality with special features. The product is often associated with a strong and reputable brand. The market is small and sales usually take place in a niche segment, as the circle of buyers is kept small, e.g. due to the high prices.

Differentiation leadership : In this strategy, the company targets a broad market and aims to gain a competitive advantage in the entire market. To achieve this, the products are offered to customers with value-adding functions and features. The resulting higher production costs also lead to higher prices for consumers.³

Porter's Strategies at the Volkswagen Group : In the following, the Volkswagen Group is analysed with regard to the previously mentioned Porter's strategies. Particular attention is paid to the special differentiation and size of the Volkswagen Group. As explained at the beginning, the Volkswagen Group consists of several companies and car brands. For the Group as a whole, it can be said that Volkswagen relies heavily on differentiation. The Group's various brands target different markets and thus adopt different strategies in order to serve the largest possible market and offer a suitable product to all customer segments, geographical regions and markets. A major advantage for the Group is the use of synergy effects and expertise. For example, the production costs for luxury brands such as Lamborghini or Bentley can be kept comparatively low, while the quality and equipment in the low-price segment, such as Skoda, remains high in comparison.

In the following, each of Porter's four strategies is assigned to a brand of the Volkswagen Group.⁴

Cost Leadership : As its motto "Simply clever"⁵ says, the Skoda brand in the VW Group stands for a simple product that is accessible to all customers. Thanks to efficient management and lean corporate structures as well as synergy effects within the Group, VW is able to offer its customers a strong price-performance ratio with its entry-level brand. This creates a new opportunity for potential customers to get a taste of the well-known German quality without having to pay a high price.⁶

Cost Focus : This strategy cannot really be categorised within the Volkswagen Group. VW does have brands that focus on costs, but a brand that aims for both cost leadership and a niche market cannot be identified in the way described in the previous chapter.

According to our analysis, no VW Group brand can be categorised here.

Differentiation Leadership: The Audi group-brand can be integrated into this strategy. Audi stands for a particularly sporty brand with a very high product quality and special driving characteristics. Audi takes its slogan "Vorsprung durch Technik"⁷, which means "Progress through technology" as a role model and is thus adept at innovative ideas designed to improve comfort, quality and the driving experience. The value-adding aspects and functions as well as the international reputation of the brand places Audi in the high-priced car market. Nevertheless, VW pursues a strategy of playing as large a market as possible with its Audi brand, which is why Audi sells in over 100 markets.⁸

Differentiation Focus:

The two luxury brands of the VW Group, Lamborghini and Bentley, can be categorized here. Like Audi, both brands focus on the luxury market and are also represented with their brands in motorsport, which underlines the sportiness and quality of companies' cars. Unlike Audi, Lamborghini and Bentley pursue a complex niche strategy. Lamborghini focuses on highly motorized super sports cars that are suitable for both motorsport and everyday life. Bentley, meanwhile, focuses on luxurious everyday use and aims to offer the highest level of comfort possible. Due to the very high sales prices for models of these brands, the market is limited to a rich

³ Cf. Mintzberg (1988), pp. 1-67 and Porter (1980) and cf. Slami / Mustafa / Topuzovska Latkovikj (2020), pp. 1-15

⁴ Cf. Slami / Mustafa / Topuzovska Latkovikj (2020), pp. 1-15 and cf. Volkswagen Group (n.d.-C)

⁵ Škoda (n.d.-A)

⁶ Škoda (n.d.-B)

⁷ Audi Media Center (n.d.)

⁸ Cf. Audi (n.d.)

customer segment that can afford to spend several hundred thousand euros on a car. As a result, both brands sell fewer cars than Skoda, for example, but still make a considerable profit due to high margins.⁹

IV. Leadership

The change from Martin Winterkorn and Herbert Diess to the current CEO Oliver Blume coincided with the development of the company's strategic direction, which is reflected in three main group strategies: in the former "TRANSFORM 2025+" and "ACCELERATE" strategies and the current "NEWAUTO" strategy.

Former Leadership: During Martin Winterkorn's leadership, which was marked by the emissions scandal in 2015, the TRANSFORM 2025+ strategy was adopted. This strategy aimed at realigning Volkswagen's focus on sustainable mobility, digitalisation and a customercentric approach. This strategy can be seen as pillar of the reorientation and the basis for further strategies. Winterkorn's resignation during the so-called "Dieselgate" affair led to Herbert Diess taking the lead. Under Diess' leadership, Volkswagen underwent a transformative phase that was primarily characterised by the ACCELERATE strategy. This initiative built on the foundation of TRANSFORM 2025+ and reflected a more ambitious and faster approach towards electromobility, further digitalisation and sustainable Group practices. With ACCELERATE, Volkswagen has committed to driving these areas forward faster and more consistently, thereby continuing the previously agreed change of direction within the Group and investing more money in the Group's transformation.¹⁰ Another aim was to minimise the effects and damage caused by the manipulation of exhaust gas values.¹¹

Current Leadership : During this strategic development, Oliver Blume became the new CEO. During his time in office, Volkswagen aligned itself with the NEWAUTO strategy, which represents a broader vision that goes beyond the traditional focus of a car manufacturer. NEWAUTO aims to redefine Volkswagen's role in the mobility sector and develop the company from a car manufacturer into a global mobility conglomerate. The focus is on sustainability, innovation, customer orientation and a broader range of mobility solutions and services. With the new strategy: "we are preparing ourselves for the global changes in mobility and are thus playing a key role in driving Volkswagen's transformation into a software-orientated company,"¹² the Group says. In particular, Volkswagen wants to make battery production, which has so far been harmful to the climate, more climate-friendly and drive forward the expansion of the charging infrastructure. In addition to environmental issues, VW wants to move even closer to its and potential customers. According to the Group strategy, autonomous driving is not just a scene from a movie about the future, but a key customer wish that is being driven forward in the NEWAUTO strategy. Blume's leadership reflects a continuation of these strategic priorities and ensures a balanced focus on innovation, sustainability, customer needs and operational excellence within NEWAUTO.¹³

V. CONCLUSION

The given analysis of the Volkswagen AG using the SWOT matrix made it possible to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the Group. The strengths in the very diversified brand portfolio, the global presence and the development of technological innovations should be highlighted. However, in addition to the strengths, weaknesses such as the consequences of the diesel scandal, the complex organisational structure and the dynamic development of the market were also identified. The great advantage of brand diversification can be recognised in particular because of the analysis by Porter's Generic Strategies. It should be noted that Volkswagen operates its markets in a very differentiated way and has its car brands, both for the broad market of cost leadership and for the niche luxury market. The development of the Group has been made clear through the individual strategies and CEOs up to the current NEWAUTO strategy. Volkswagen is showing adaptability and wants to dynamically adjust mobility, tailored to its customers, to innovative electromobility in order to remain an important global player in the future.

⁹ Audi (n.d.) and cf. Bentley Motors (n.d.) and cf. Lamborghini (n.d.)

¹⁰ Cf. Volkswagen Newsroom (2021) and cf. Volkswagen Newsroom (n.d.) and cf. Volkswagen Group (2021)

¹¹ Behrmann (2022)

¹² Volkswagen Group (n.d.-D)

¹³ Cf. Hyun-bin (2022) and cf. Volkswagen Group (n.d.-D) and Volkswagen Group (2022.-A)

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