INTERVIEW
BERNHARD MAIER
ŠKODA AUTO CEO
What has been the key to ŠKODA’s remarkable success in recent years?
It is an interaction of various aspects, starting with our clear brand Strategy 2025, which includes cross-functional strategies with 16 action fields. They have an impact on all our business areas like digital transformation or sustainability. Equally important is the transformation of ourselves — our thinking and acting, our attitude and behavior. This is also reflected in our three brand values: ‘simplifying’, ‘human’ and ‘surprising’. All our products and services are based on these values. Customers understand and appreciate this. Another factor is our consistent product strategy, which is proving to be very successful around the world. Here is another example: Three years ago, we launched our SUV campaign with the KODIAQ. With the KAROQ and KAMIQ, we quickly expanded our product range. Today almost one in three ŠKODAs sold is an SUV. And although we are living in a highly digitalized world, it is the people that make the difference. So, the team that is implementing our Strategy 2025 is at least as important to our success. In ŠKODA’s case, it is extraordinary: over 42,000 Škodians get to work with a great deal of passion, commitment and a ‘clever together’ attitude — as we call it. You get a sense of this special team spirit when you talk to Škodians. And last but not least, we listen very carefully to what our customers really want.

What does the average ŠKODA customer expect and appreciate the most?
Our customers expect us to deliver on a promise with every new product. I like to describe this as a “smart understatement”. It is a set of values that all our models fulfill. These include superior roominess, maximum functionality, convincing value-for-money and a clear, characterful design. These qualities are exactly what our customers all over the world appreciate.

What are the key challenges for ŠKODA going forward?
We are certainly concerned with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. We expect the biggest impact in the second quarter, followed by a gradual recovery in the third quarter and possibly returning to the previous year’s level in the fourth quarter. Prerequisite for this development is the fast execution of state subsidy programs in the various regions. On a positive note, we have posted record results in recent years and we currently have sufficient liquidity. Our company is strategically well-positioned, has an excellent foundation and an attractive, modern model portfolio. We are therefore sticking to our medium and long-term plans. This means we are systematically continuing the transformation process we embarked on as part of our Strategy 2025 — the transformation from the internal combustion engine to the electric car, from analogue to digital, towards agile processes with flat hierarchies and — if you like — the transformation from single products to holistic solutions.

How will ŠKODA’s vehicle portfolio evolve over the next few years?
We are currently in the middle of the largest product campaign in ŠKODA’s history. From the beginning of 2019 to the end of 2022, we are launching a total of 30 new models, derivatives, product upgrades and variants. These include ten partially or fully electric models. This year we are introducing the ENYAQ iV, our first all-electric car that was designed as such from the outset. We are making it the flagship of a new era for ŠKODA.

Are there any electric vehicles in the current portfolio?
Yes, of course. Last year we entered the electric age with two models, the all-electric CITGOe iV and the SUPERB iV, our first plug-in hybrid. This was a very special moment for us. Now we are quickly moving forward through the steps I described. We are convinced of the technology: In the foreseeable future, the e-drive will be the most effective way to sustainably reduce CO₂ emissions — alongside our highly efficient combustion engines that we are continuing to optimize and that are also helping to reduce our global CO₂ footprint.
And, of course, we are taking our employees along with us into the future: Around 20,000 Škodians have already received training in e-mobility. In the next two years alone, we will be investing 40 million euros annually in training and further education to get our workforce ready for the future.

**Digitalization and software: What are the priorities for ŠKODA?**
The car is increasingly becoming a highly intelligent mobile device, the "perfect third place" after the workplace and home. Our top priority is to offer our customers real, practical added value. The iV ecosystem we are building around our e-mobility portfolio is a good example of this. If you drive an iV model, you will receive, among other things, the MyŠKODA Powerpass, which allows you to charge your iV quickly and easily at public charging stations throughout Europe. This is where digitalization is helping us make e-mobility easy and convenient for our customers. In this way we are creating an authentic brand experience and sustainably expanding our added value in the digital area.

**Could you give us a few more examples?**
With services like CityMove, BeRider and HoppyGo, we already have a whole range of mobility and vehicle-on-demand solutions. With our DigiLabs in Prague, Pune, Beijing and Tel Aviv, we also have a global network through which we are collaborating with promising start-ups. Our aim is to forge links with the local start-up scene and develop tailor-made mobility solutions for our customers. When it comes to digitalization, in particular, our motto is: Partnering and speed are key! This is gradually bringing us closer to our target vision that we defined with our Strategy 2025: “ŠKODA — the Simply Clever Company for the Best Mobility Solutions”.

**In which field does the ŠKODA brand have to change the most in the next few years?**
I think one thing is certain at the beginning of this new decade: the speed of transformation will continue to increase. Flexibility, adaptability and also resilience will become even more important — the Covid-19 pandemic shows this very clearly. Of course, our business and the general conditions are also constantly changing. This is why we are now heading to working intensively to cover our ŠKODA Strategy 2025+ till 2030, which involves systematically developing the core strategic topics. We are making adjustments wherever necessary: We continue to sharpen our focus on the customer, expand our value chain to include e-components, software development and connectivity services and we are making ŠKODA even more agile, faster and more diverse.

**You have been the CEO of ŠKODA for the last 4.5 years. What is your leadership philosophy?**
I can summarize it in three words: transparency, consistency and straightforwardness. For me as an entrepreneur, transparency means having as complete an overview of my business as possible. This is a fundamental prerequisite for making the right business decisions that are verifiable, valid and sustainable. Consistency describes the implementation of these decisions. And straightforwardness, for me, means standing behind the decisions we make and taking responsibility for them. And now, with Covid-19: Never take anything for granted. Business is change, there is nothing else.
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