Henry Ford and the Model T: Lessons for Product Platforming and Mass Customization

Abstract

Everyone knows Henry Ford’s famous maxim: “You can have any color car you want so long as it’s black.” While he is recognized as the father of mass production, his contributions extend well beyond that, offering valuable lessons for product platforming and mass customization. While Ford’s pioneering production systems are widely known and studied, few realize that Ford’s Model T could be viewed as one of the greatest platforms ever created, enabling his workers to customize this model for a variety of different markets. In this paper, we study Ford’s Model T in depth and describe insights into Ford’s vision and his car: how the platform was built, how it was leveraged, and how the platform was maintained dynamically and with continuous improvements to maximize learning and economies of scale. Finally, we compare Ford’s approach to more current approaches to learn from his innovative product line. In some aspects this old car still runs faster than us, and we can learn valuable lessons from the past to avoid future mistakes and improve current practices.

Keywords: automotive history, automotive design, product family, product platform, mass customization

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