

## **OSCar – The Open Source Car Project**

Markus Merz’s head was aching. Maybe he’d had one beer too many. The first “OSCar Come Together” had ended in a long night out at the “Wurstmarkt,” an Oktoberfest-style fair in the Southern German town of Bad Dürkheim. The “Come Together” meeting had been a great success. Car developers and designers who had formerly known each other only via email met for the first time to exchange ideas in a direct and personal way.<sup>1</sup>

During the day’s discussions, they had been able to agree on many important issues of OSCar, the Open Source Car Project. The OSCar Project was unique from the start. As a community of automobile developers, their primary goal was to design and develop a car over the Internet.<sup>2</sup> It seemed possible for the project to succeed. Still, after the meeting, the most important question remained unsolved: How could they turn this idea into a profitable business? Markus looked to the traditional automobile manufacturers for answers.

### **Traditional Automobile Design and Development: An Industry in Flux**

From its inception, the OSCar Project sought to satisfy an important market need. Markus thought about the signals he was seeing in the marketplace with regard to the development of new cars. At the DaimlerChrysler Innovation Symposium in October 2000, Hans-Joachim Schopf, head of Development for Mercedes-Benz reported that, “In the past ten years, development productivity (of automobiles) doubled while the average development time for a new production series had been cut in half, despite the increasing complexity of the process.”<sup>3</sup> When the industry’s leading figures predicted that development time would be reduced by another 25 percent, Markus saw this as confirmation that the traditional methods of automobile manufacturing would need to be re-evaluated.

The automobile industry was in the midst of fundamental changes to meet the ever-increasing needs for shorter development cycles. Consumers wanted more features to choose from when they purchased new cars. In order to meet these demands, auto companies worldwide continuously re-invented their designs. Thus, speed to market became the primary focus of many automobile manufacturers.

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The traditional development of automobiles was not flexible enough to accommodate this rapid speed to market. Traditionally, manufacturing was dependent on a lengthy set of laborious processes with little or no input from anyone but the most senior executives. Recently, however, car companies recognized that they had to overhaul these processes to meet the needs of their target markets.<sup>4</sup>

The industry was focusing on three primary initiatives:

- 1. Centralization of Car Development:** Many companies had begun to implement more integrative manufacturing processes like concurrent engineering. New product development practices relied on implementing cross-functional teamwork through every stage of the development process. Contrary to the traditional approach where engineers were not privy to the design concept until just prior to production, this new approach ensured that all team members would be involved in every step of the manufacturing process. These insights showed Markus that the market was ready for a design concept that would promote the sharing of information while both reducing costs and increasing speed to market.
- 2. Increasing Complexity and Communication Needed During Development:** In order to make the process of new product development more flexible, it was essential to successfully manage coordination efforts among engineers, craftsman, employees and suppliers. To facilitate this goal, many manufacturers found that bringing these capabilities in-house reduced dissention and quickened development time. Yet, Markus knew first-hand that many companies still did not implement most of the suggestions made by their employees. This was the impetus for the OSCar Project. Markus was acutely aware of the fact that firms still felt that it was better to rely on a web of suppliers and experts rather than to bring all these functions in-house. But, regardless of whether automakers chose vertical integration and a firm-centric focus or chose to rely on a small web of preferred suppliers, designers and engineers, the process of building cars was no longer a static operation. With the increasing number of moving parts involved, controlling the process was no easy feat. This, thought Markus, was just another reason for automotive giants to give serious consideration to the OSCar concept.
- 3. Implementation of the Computer Aided Design (CAD) Methods:** Markus had personally experienced the limits of the traditional approach to product design while working for BMW. There, the product development process consisted of three major prototyping cycles – with each cycle requiring thousand of design prototypes.<sup>5</sup> Often costly and time consuming, the creation of these design prototypes required that suppliers and manufacturers all have the equipment necessary to press the sheet metal needed for the car's production. This highly specialized process made it impossible to speed up development without jeopardizing craftsmanship. BMW was forced to adapt its traditional approach by using CAD models.

When BMW began to implement the CAD system, traditional design experts praised the benefits of CAD models. By utilizing computer simulation, every aspect of production could be tested for functionality and safety earlier in the development process. This resulted in significant cost savings to

the manufacturer.<sup>6</sup> Markus continued to muse. If the experts had seen the merits of CAD, then surely they would relish the OSCar.

The traditional approach to car manufacturing was fast becoming a thing of the past – and Markus hoped to capitalize on this trend.

### **OSCar – The Idea**

The idea for the OSCar project was born during an Internet seminar in the autumn of 1999. A local politician praised the blessings of the “digital economy.” In the audience, Markus stopped paying attention. A former marketing manager at BMW and CEO of a small consulting firm that provided e-business strategies to the car industry, Markus was no “Internet newbie” at all. However, he wanted to go beyond the usual e-commerce concepts. Markus was wondering how to apply the Internet to the automobile industry in a really new and creative way. Sure, e-procurement, e-commerce and virtual market places changed the way car manufacturers conducted their business. But wasn’t there a way to go a step further? How could one use the World Wide Web to re-define the way autos were built and developed?<sup>7</sup>

In the software business, open source and open system models had started to revolutionize the business fundamentally.<sup>8</sup> Netscape had just made the source code of its browser software accessible to the public. Linux, the open system operating system, was considered as a reasonable alternative to established products of Microsoft, IBM and Sun. Millions of computer programmers worldwide spent their free time working on these software products. An idea materialized in Markus’s imagination. Why not do the same in the automobile industry? Why not design an open source car? Thus, the idea for OSCar was born.<sup>9</sup>

Car designers are very particular people. They love cars. They live cars. From nine to five, they work in the office towers of DaimlerChrysler, Toyota, VW or Ford. After work, they continue to think about cars. They continuously produce new ideas, design new car bodies, and create new engines. However, being just tiny gearwheels in the moneymaking machines of international conglomerates, most of their ideas are continually ignored and never put into action. Moreover, there are millions of car enthusiasts all over the world who would love to contribute their ideas to develop new cars. So, why not use the Internet to collect all this creative potential for one worldwide car design project – the OSCar.

Markus knew that in the automobile industry, the design process had become one of the most elaborate and expensive phases in a car’s development process. The actual manufacturing process, on the other hand, had become a commodity that often was outsourced to other companies. If the OSCar project led to a complete and feasible design of a new automobile, it should be possible to sell it to one of the major car manufacturers. Connecting the creative input of millions of car enthusiasts to one global development web could lead to a superior product, the car for the new millennium, the vehicle the established car manufacturers had never managed to develop.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Initiator – Markus Merz**

Markus' career in the automobile industry had been somewhat unusual. Having been fascinated by cars since his childhood, he found his way to BMW as a visitors' guide for sightseeing tours at the company's Munich factory. From there, he jumped to BMW's marketing department in its German headquarters, then to the American branch. In the early 1990s, Markus was the first person at BMW to embrace the idea of using CD-ROMs for multimedia marketing of the company's products. In 1995/96, he was involved in the development and launch of [www.bmw.com](http://www.bmw.com), the company's highly acclaimed Internet presence.

In 1998, Markus left BMW to start Monocom, a boutique-consulting firm that delivered e-strategies and other consulting services to automobile companies, in particular BMW and its German competitors. Monocom's operations would facilitate the launch of the OSCar idea and provide the infrastructure for the OSCar project (e.g., office space, computer facilities, administration and maintenance).<sup>11</sup>

### **The OSCar Manifesto**

Markus launched the OSCar project by writing a manifesto that attempted to structure and define the basic goals and principles of the project. This vision described the OSCar project as a development process without boundaries and limitations [see **Exhibit 1**].<sup>12</sup>

The basic rule of OSCar followed the open source principle of the computer world. Just as source code has no owner but is in the public domain, all design results of the OSCar should be freely available to every member of the OSCar community. The entire community should make all major design decisions in a democratic manner. Everybody – including private designers, companies, universities, and other organizations – should be able to join this design community.

Furthermore, the manifesto defined that the first OSCar prototype should be developed within 36 months [see **Exhibit 2** for details of the tentative project schedule].

### **Implementation of the OSCar Project**

The heart of the OSCar project was its website <http://www.theOSCarproject.org>. Markus and his team spent the first months thoughtfully designing and developing this site. Besides describing and advertising the OSCar project, the web site was intended to be the communication medium for the developers. It offered various news groups, online chats, electronic whiteboards, forums, data bases and news servers that were designed to enable discussions and information exchange between auto experts. Having started entirely in German, the website was soon translated into the English language in order to allow car enthusiasts worldwide to participate in the undertaking.

The OSCar project was broken down into sub-projects, following the typical structure from BMW. Every sub-project – e.g., engine, body (the “skin”), mainframe, transmission, and electronics – had its own news group. The most important task for each discussion forum was to decide on a common platform.

In order to get a quick start, Markus found that it was necessary to strengthen the OSCar community by complementing the web site with “real” meetings. Therefore, he initiated the “OSCar Come Together,” a regular event where OSCar friends and developers from all over Germany met, socialized, and discussed their project. At this event, the first crucial decisions were made:

- The OSCar should be a modular concept – different design versions should be easily interchangeable.
- The OSCar should be a “world car” – simple, cheap, reliable, easy to maintain and repair.
- It should also be a high-tech tool – fun, innovative, full of features you would not find in a commercially available car.
- New, environmentally friendly engine types – e.g., fuel cell, hydrogen or electricity – should be taken into consideration.<sup>13</sup>

[**Exhibit 3** shows several design outlines of the OSCar “skin,” i.e., the automobile’s exterior design]

### **Defining the OSCar CAD Platform**

The OSCar team quickly discovered that a common CAD platform would be critical to the further progress of the project. In the international automobile industry, no software standard had yet emerged in regard to CAD programs. Almost every major car manufacturer used a different program. Because of this disparity, problems were apparent. While software tools were available to import/export data between different systems, this transfer always resulted in a loss of data. Furthermore, the professional auto CAD software ran exclusively on dedicated workstations. In order to allow car designers to work at home in their spare time, a CAD platform had to be agreed upon that would run on a personal computer.

After many debates, the OSCar project team finally agreed to adopt CATIA, a CAD program that was also used by a large number of car manufacturers. The group even managed to identify a supplier of an open source clone of CATIA who would provide its program to the OSCar project. This choice was important in two ways. First, it allowed a large number of individuals to participate in the design process using tools with which they were acquainted. Second, using CAD software that was industry standard would enable OSCar to deliver its final product to one of the major car manufacturers.

### **What’s Next for OSCar – Developing a Business Model**

In the following months, the OSCar project continuously built momentum. The traffic on the OSCar web site increased daily, and so did the number of registered OSCar members. Car designers from all over Germany contributed concepts and discussed their ideas using the OSCar news groups and chat functions. These were mainly employees of the large Germany-based car manufacturers, e.g. Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Volkswagen, Ford and Opel, a subsidiary of GM. Soon, an English web site was launched to facilitate involvement from international developers. Companies sponsored and supported the project, and newspapers and radio stations ran stories about OSCar and its founder. Yet, Markus was facing the greatest challenge ever.

While OSCar had started as a personal vision as well as a public relations tool for his company Monocom, the Open Source Car Project had now taken on a life of its own. It already occupied too much of Monocom's resources, including Markus' own time. In order to bring this idea to fruition, OSCar had to prove its viability as a profitable business for the long run.

The OSCar initiative surely created a lot of publicity for Monocom, but how could the company capitalize on this? Could money be made publishing and marketing the results of the OSCar project? Could Monocom achieve for the car industry what Red Hat had accomplished in the computer world when it started to publish Linux?

The OSCar organization knew they had their work cut out for them. It would be a formidable challenge to develop OSCar. But, even after it was developed, would anyone want the design? Everyone, especially Markus, believed that the final design would have value. After all, it would be based on the best ideas in the industry and was clearly filling a market need. In addition, the design could be given to automobile manufacturers for free – why wouldn't they take it? There was one clear supposition that kept haunting Markus. The final OSCar design would be marketable only if it met the current needs of an automobile manufacturer. Markus had to make sure that OSCar attracted the attention of possible buyers. OSCar needed to be compelling enough with its modular design and fuel-efficiency to cause a major manufacturer to attempt to build it.

Markus knew he already had market momentum on his side. Several automobile manufacturers, including DaimlerChrysler/Mercedes-Benz, General Motors and Ford had recently expressed difficulty in developing fuel-efficient cars with the capabilities of their current design teams.<sup>14,15,16,17</sup> An OSCar design should meet these needs. But fitting a specific design solution to a particular manufacturing facility would require moving away from the core OSCar ideals of open source and consensus design methods.

Markus and the rest of the management team began to mull over their options:

### **1. An Expanded OSCar Line**

After the release of the first OSCar, the OSCar management team believed that the development concept could be used to accomplish many different goals. Utilizing open source development, OSCar could easily expand its online community to gain the expertise needed to develop the next generation of OSCars – whether a sport utility vehicle, a high performance luxury car or even an electric car. The fluidity of the OSCar developers would help change a company's capabilities to meet the market demand. Perhaps after OSCar gained credibility in the market place, they could begin to charge for future modular car designs.

### **2. Partnerships and Alliances**

In early 2000, Ford Motor Company had formed a joint venture with the women's community web site iVillage ([www.ivillage.com](http://www.ivillage.com)) which allowed users to design "the car of their dreams" online. This way, Ford used the Internet as a channel to collect design suggestions from customers.<sup>18,19</sup> Obviously, the OSCar community of car enthusiasts and developers would be even more valuable.

Therefore, another option for OSCar would be to pursue sponsorships and partnerships for the OSCar Project. Notable sponsorship opportunities existed among the automobile manufacturers – just about any one of them could subsidize part of the OSCar Project. In a way, each of the manufacturers is already sponsoring the project though indirectly, by having employees who contribute information and feedback while acting as OSCar developers in their spare time. The resultant community of developers may provide unexpected benefits to the automobile manufacturers as a product of an idea exchange across firms.

OSCar can also form business partnerships with consulting firms, marketing organizations, automobile suppliers and component manufacturers. Since all of its current efforts are focused on design capabilities, OSCar must consider what other resources it needs in marketing and public relations services that it does not currently possess. Relationships with automobile suppliers and component manufacturers may be necessary if there are specific design features that are not adequately addressed during the open source design process.

### 3. Consulting and Value-Added Customization Services

Perhaps the largest potential revenue stream for the OSCar Project will come from servicing and consulting revenues. Any automobile manufacturer that buys a design will be less involved in the development process. Therefore, the automobile manufacturers will need some advice on how to adapt the module to their specific needs and capabilities. But, how exactly should the OSCar management construct a team to deliver these services? How should these services be priced?

There were other ideas that were being considered by the management team. One thought was to provide complementary services. For example, OSCar could offer its clients incremental additions to existing designs; they could develop research reports and recommend integration services and commercialization ideas.

As the day began to wane, Markus and his team wondered if they would ever be able to see OSCar available on the streets of Germany or anywhere else in the world. Further, they worried that even if an automobile manufacturer did adopt the modular design, would they agree to take on the risk of manufacturing? Markus couldn't help but ponder whether the OSCar Project would ever become a profitable enterprise. Would automobile manufacturers be willing to give up control of their own product development processes? In today's competitive environment, the car's distinct design was seen as the secret that determined ultimate success in the market. Would a company be interested in building a car based on a generic design that was already known to the public? Would companies require exclusivity, or would they accept the fact that many manufacturers all over the world would be building "their" own OSCars?

On the other hand, having a functional, yet static, business model might jeopardize the success of the OSCar project. Auto enthusiasts were eager to participate in this project because they wanted to create a car that did *not* conform to established traditions. Would the creation of a formidable business discourage and damage the "Robin Hood" attitude of the OSCar community? Would Markus ever be able to transform *www.theOSCarproject.org* into *www.theOSCarproject.com*?

**Epilogue**

In a recent speech to shareholders, a high-level manager at DaimlerChrysler made a standing offer to support the OSCar project. Without mentioning OSCar or its founder directly, this DaimlerChrysler executive pointed out that his company would “support an open source car project in any way possible”<sup>20</sup>. Would Markus become the Linus Torvalds of the automobile world?

**EXHIBIT 1:****Excerpts from the OSCar Manifesto**

*“To build a car without engineering center, without a boss, without money, and without borders... but with the creative help of the internet community – that is the meaning of empowerment, the meaning of challenge, and the initial reason for the internet.”*

*“In the next 36 months we will together develop a car in the internet – the OSCar. This vehicle is to be free from barriers and competition. It will redefine mobility.... That is how I want to blow past the hype of the ‘New Economy’ – with OSCar.”*

*“We have an expandable forum that allows us to think and discuss about what OSCar means... about what OSCar looks like... about what kind of car we would like OSCar to be. We will join without regard to our past, our location, or what car manufacturer we like best. We will join together with a focus on the future – individuals, schools, colleges, companies, and hackers will join in and help define how we continue.”*

*“Engineers who are used to developing against other engineers might just find themselves in that same forum – working together to solve the same problems.”*

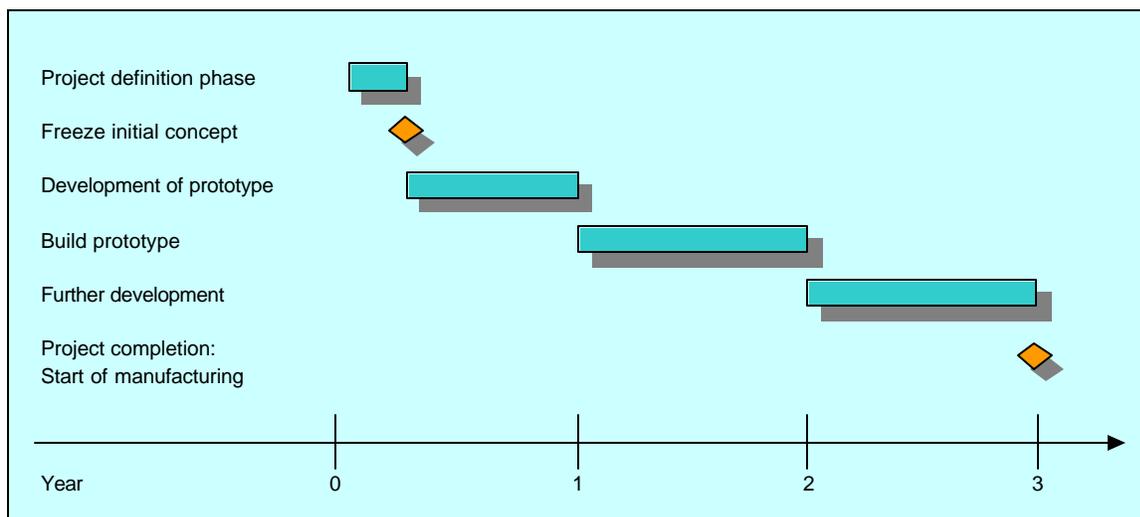
*“We will build the car as a web-based community. Without a boss... without hierarchies.”*

(Source: OSCar web site <http://www.theOSCarproject.org>).

**EXHIBIT 2:**

Tentative schedule for the execution of the OSCar project

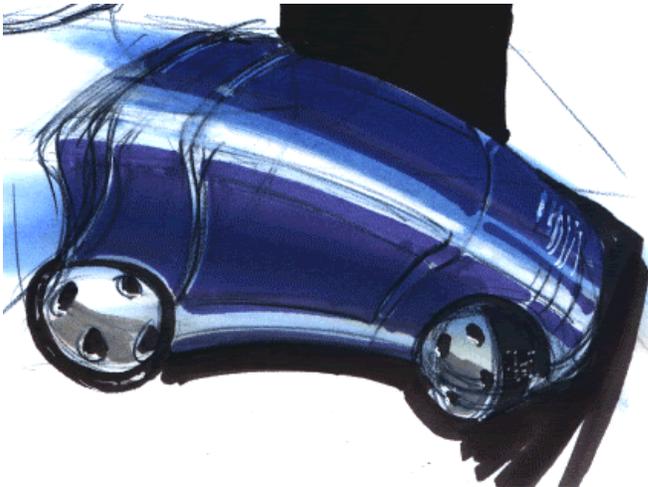
(Source: OSCar web site <http://www.theOSCarproject.org>)



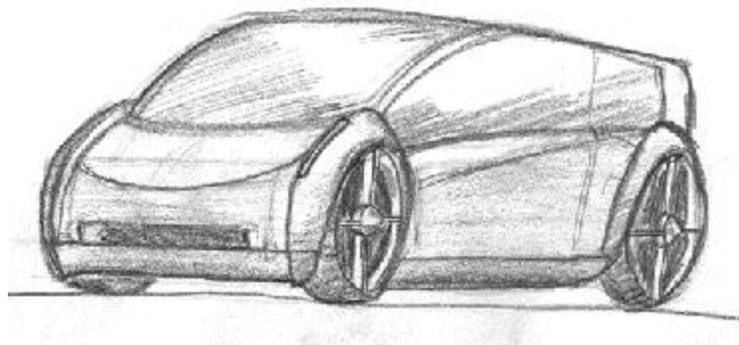
**EXHIBIT 3:**

Early concepts of OSCar's "skin," i.e. its exterior design – artists' views of the OSCar, and three-dimensional rendered computer models

(Source: OSCar web site <http://www.theOSCarproject.org>).



**OSCar**  
[www.theoscarproject.org](http://www.theoscarproject.org)



## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Lukas Neckermann, *Interview*, New York University, Stern School of Business, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2000.
- <sup>2</sup> Radio broadcast 8/23/00, Antenne Bayern, Germany, “OSCar – Das erste Internetauto” (OSCar – the first internet car), (<http://www.antennebayern.de/antenne/news/auto/rubrik/oscar/index.html>)
- <sup>3</sup> Hans-Joachim Schopf, *DaimlerChrysler Innovation Symposium*, November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2000, Sindelfingen, Germany.
- <sup>4</sup> **Article “Taurus: The Making of the Car that Saved Ford,” excerpt from “A Declaration of War”**
- <sup>5</sup> Stefan Thomke, “BMW AG: The Digital Auto Project,” Harvard Business School, January 14<sup>th</sup>, 1999.
- <sup>6</sup> Stefan Thomke, “BMW AG: The Digital Auto Project,” Harvard Business School, January 14<sup>th</sup>, 1999.
- <sup>7</sup> Web site The OSCar Project, (<http://www.theoscarproject.org/english.html>)
- <sup>8</sup> Article Linux-Magazin (Germany), 08/2000, “Open-Source-Auto: Linux als Vorbild.”
- <sup>9</sup> Web site The OSCar Project, (<http://www.theoscarproject.org/english.html>)
- <sup>10</sup> Article “Das babylonische Automobile” (the Babylonian automobile) (<http://www.heupferd.de/automobile>)
- <sup>11</sup> Lukas Neckermann, *Interview*, New York University, Stern School of Business, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2000.
- <sup>12</sup> Web site The OSCar Project, (<http://www.theoscarproject.org/english.html>)
- <sup>13</sup> Web site Michael Rieken, *OSCar Konzeptvorschlag*, (OSCar concept proposal) (<http://home.t-online.de/home/Michael.Rieken/oscar.html>)
- <sup>14</sup> Web site DaimlerChrysler Corporation, ([http://www.daimlerchrysler.com/index\\_e.htm](http://www.daimlerchrysler.com/index_e.htm))
- <sup>15</sup> Web site General Motors Corporation, ([http://www.gm.com/cgi-bin/pr\\_index.pl](http://www.gm.com/cgi-bin/pr_index.pl))
- <sup>16</sup> Web site General Motors Corporation, ([http://www.generalmotors.com/cgi-bin/pr\\_display.pl?1853](http://www.generalmotors.com/cgi-bin/pr_display.pl?1853))
- <sup>17</sup> Web Site Ford Corporation (<http://www.ford.com/servlet/ecmcs/ford/index.jsp?SECTION=ourCompany&LEVEL2=newsroom&LEVEL3=pressReleases&LEVEL4=hybridElectricVehicles&LEVEL5=fordToSellAffordableHybridElectricVehicle>)
- <sup>18</sup> Debbie Reiching, Senior VP Marketing and Research, iVillage, *Corporate Presentation at New York University, Stern School of Business*, November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2000.
- <sup>19</sup> Web site iVillage – “Women’s Auto Center – Design your Dream Car” (<http://www.ivillage.com/auto/dreamcar/dreamcar.html>)
- <sup>20</sup> Lukas Neckermann, *Interview*, New York University, Stern School of Business, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2000.