

Design Management of HONDA in Product Development of “ FIT ”

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Abstract : Presently, Honda has been adopting a catch phrase saying, "small is smart." The phrase means, "with agility like that of small companies, to challenge new product development to quickly provide products in the market that will satisfy the user needs." The first product created with this concept is "FIT." It is a car created with the much more refined rugby approach, and successfully led a van of cars to be lined up in the "small car series," which Honda will start to develop.

Key words: *Design management , ' FIT ', Rugby approach , HONDA*

1. Introduction

Since 1997, Honda has been applying the catch phrase, "small is smart". This phrase refers to the fact that Honda promotes new product development with the agility more commonly associated with smaller companies.

It usually takes an average of three or four years to commercialize the concept for a car and market it. As Honda announced this catch phrase in 1997, the cars it marketed around 2001 were expected to become a manifestation of this philosophy. In 2001, Honda introduced “Fit” (Figure 1), a car that caught the public imagination and won two big prizes, “Japan Car of the Year”, and “RJC Car of the Year”.

2. Concept: “Personal Max Van”

“Fit” has the novelty and high utility of a compact van. Its concept is captured by the phrase “Personal Max Van”, and includes the following elements:

- 1) Max fuel efficiency: outstanding fuel economy
- 2) Max fun: spacious interior and multifunctionality that other small cars have yet to achieve
- 3) Max stylishness: strong character and high quality for a small car

As you can understand from the above, “Fit” was developed by consistently applying the design concept of “small”. Its “super short-nosed form” is a classic example of a new design concept in keeping with the above three principles.



Figure. 1 Honda “Fit”

Its interior was designed from the user’s viewpoint to accurately reflect their lifestyle within the confines of the small space provided. For effective use of the available internal space, the position and inclination of the seats can be adjusted with one-touch functions to select one of four modes (Utility mode / Long mode / Tall mode / Refresh mode).

Such a setup fully demonstrates the fruits of the design work, achieved through collaborative design management to eliminate the barrier between the manufacturer and consumers. This is because the so-called “rugby approach”, a method of design management, was used in the development process for “Fit”.

3. Development using the “rugby approach”

3.1 Marketing: defining the market segment for the “world small car”

In the development of “Fit”, there were two overriding considerations. These were:

- 1) Fuel-efficient and competitive product
- 2) Product targeting what was almost a new market for Honda

A project team was organized to achieve these objectives. Since they had to determine what kind of small car Honda should develop, they first went to Europe, where small cars are very popular, to conduct market research including on-site inspection, interviews with automobile dealers, and analysis of important features as contained in local journals.

Through this research, they discovered that European users stressed the need not only for sportiness but also for multifunctionality, including flexible seat arrangements, in common with Japanese users. This result completely contradicted the commonly held stereotype that European users focus more on style and fashion, with

little interest in a comfortable interior and convenience (including a large luggage compartment).

In marketing, to determine the potential needs of customers, it is necessary to set aside personal beliefs and taste and critically review the assumptions one has. It is also necessary to come into direct contact with customers in the actual market (reality) and promote a collaborative relationship with them.

After the market research in Europe, the project team decided to develop the “world small car”, a small car meeting the requirements of customers all over the world, without segmentation between Japanese and European markets. In brief, they came to the conclusion that a small car of true value is one with outstanding fuel-economy, and a spacious interior created by effective use of a flexible seat configuration.

3.2 Design: “Global Small Platform”

The most significant breakthrough in the design of “Fit” was placing its fuel tank centrally under the two front seats. This “center-tank layout” was an innovative way of realizing a near-future design concept, “ZENSHIN Cabin Form”. The word “ZENSHIN” encompasses three meanings, “spacious”, “advanced”, and “all-new”. If the 42-liter fuel tank, the biggest single component underneath the passenger compartment were positioned under the rear seats, the cabin would not be made more spacious than those of conventional models.

The “center-tank layout” therefore allows “Fit” to have a large amount of available space under the rear seats as the only component present is the suspension. This free space enables the seats to be fully reclined.

This innovative design is referred to as the “Global Small Platform”, symbolizing the fact that the design concept successfully solved the most difficult problem for small cars, namely, how to create a spacious cabin. A car’s styling should consist of designs that express a concept.

In other words, the important thing is to harmonize the design concept and style, or in other words, “how to attract customers at a glance”. Yoshio Ui, the “Fit” designer in chief said, “Because a car is marketed without an explanation about its underlying concept, the actual car itself must directly convey to consumers the concept upon which it is built. The actual car means the sum total of all design factors including its concept and technology, and the design itself must fully reveal everything about the car.” In short, Honda’s unique design must give the car its originality and allow it to demonstrate its presence and new values.

3.3 Engineering: development of a new engine as a core competence

To achieve outstanding fuel economy, “Fit” has a newly developed i-DSI engine, the development of which began two years prior to the organization of the project team for “Fit”. This engine was based on a totally new concept, and its preparation preceded the inception of the project team by two years.

3.4 Sales: birth of a world car

Through the activities mentioned above, “Fit” came to have an “all-new” engine and body. (“all-new” means that all components have been newly developed without reliance on the parts of existing cars.) “Fit” has the following features: a spacious cabin that can accommodate four adults, minivan-class interior height, and a large luggage space. Although economically priced (minimum price of 1,065,000 yen), its design is highly impressive, and it is equipped with seats that can be adjusted with one hand (so-called “ultra seats”). Moreover, it achieves a fuel economy of 23 kilometers per liter. The synergy created through the combination of these elements has made “Fit” very attractive to consumers.

In July of 2001, the month following its launch, “Fit” recorded higher monthly sales than its competitor, Toyota’s “Vitz”. Although “Fit” was launched two months after the beginning of the fiscal year, it recorded sales of 104,298 units and was ranked sixth among best-selling cars in Japan for the year. (Based on data supplied by the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association on monthly automobile sales excluding light cars.)

These results are clear evidence that “Fit” is “a car having many of the elements of a big seller” and was successfully developed through the strong collaborative efforts of the marketing, engineering, and designing departments. The fact that “Fit” is a car that made no visible compromises makes it “a car having many of the elements of a big seller”. This success has boosted the confidence of the sales department and their expectations for the product; helping them to carry out their ongoing collaboration with other departments smoothly. This has had the overall effect and benefit of immeasurably enhancing employee loyalty.

4. Conclusion

Having a small body 3.8m long, 1.7m wide, and 1.5m high, “Fit” aims to make the users’ lifestyle more dynamic and stylish. It is also seen as the first car in a whole new series of small cars that Honda plans to develop under the theme of “Perfect fit to the new lifestyle of the 21st century”.

Beginning with “Fit”, Honda plans to provide other “small cars designed to meet the diverse needs of customers in Japan, Asia, and Europe. By doing this the company will fulfill one of its most important guiding principles: “For Worldwide Customer Satisfaction”.

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