

Sad tale of an ugly duckling

Aston Martin's alliance with Toyota is a U-turn that can only damage the classic British marque

Once in a while, a brand strategy is announced that is so stupid, so anti-theoretical to the principles of brand management, that it takes your breath away. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Aston Martin Cygnet.

As the picture below reveals, this is a very different kind of Aston Martin. For starters, it's not very powerful, given its 67-horsepower engine – that's 353 horses short of the V8 Vantage. Nor does it look like an Aston Martin.

Not surprising, really, given that it is based on a Toyota platform – and not just any Toyota. The Cygnet is based on its smallest four-seater, the iQ city car.

According to Aston Martin's chief executive, Dr Ulrich Bez, the Cygnet will 'apply Aston Martin design language, craftsmanship and brand values to a new segment of the market'.

Dr Bez, have you lost your mind? Toyota is a fine company, but it makes Japanese, mass-market, economy cars. You run Aston Martin – the most English, exclusive luxury brand ever to have existed.

Reports suggest you will soon be producing 5000 Cygnets a year, making it your company's number-one production model. Your own definition of Aston Martin's DNA is a combination of power, beauty and soul.

How can a car with a lawnmower engine, which, to me, looks like a punch in the balls, and is designed in Tokyo, possibly fit within your excellent prescription of the brand?

Can you be the same Dr Bez who, barely a year ago, said: 'There is nothing in my five-year-plan that allows for sharing with other makers. We have our own technology and structure and our own platform. We do not have any reason to go and change?' Because last week, you said exactly the opposite when you announced that the Cygnet was 'made possible with the support of an organisation of Toyota's stature and capability and the intelligent design and perfect city car package of the iQ'.

There are two possible explanations for the brand abomination that is the Cygnet and the 180° change in Aston Martin's corporate strategy.

Maybe it has run the numbers for 2010 and is coming up short. The downturn in luxury-car orders, combined with the massive fixed costs associated with being a British car

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manufacturer, might mean that Aston Martin has to quickly find funds from more accessible line extensions.

If it really is short of cash, though, it should follow Ferrari's strategy of licensing multiple brand extensions for products outside the automotive category. Such additions make instant cash but, unlike line extensions such as the Cygnet, do not damage the equity of a brand in its original category.

Alternatively, Aston Martin may be moving quickly to avoid new emission standards soon to be enforced by both the EU and US authorities. Car makers will soon be penalised if their average CO₂ emissions exceed a certain level.

Competitors such as Ferrari (part of Fiat) and Lamborghini (part of Audi) can use their house of brands architecture to share the excessive CO₂ production of their sports cars across a range of smaller, more environmentally friendly vehicles. Aston Martin's single brand structure offers no such opportunity, but if half the cars it sold were Cygnets, with CO₂ emissions of 99g/km, it could still sell its existing models, which emit four times that, without the need to develop hybrid engines.

Whether the dilemma is economic or environmental, Aston Martin cannot afford to dilute its brand and desecrate its heritage with the Cygnet. There must be another way.

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30 seconds on... Aston Martin Cygnet

■ The **prototype Cygnet** is likely to go into production in the 'not too distant future', according to Aston Martin. It is expected to be priced at about **£20,000**.

■ According to **Dr Ulrich Bez**, 'When I saw the iQ I immediately saw potential for our two companies to work together. **Two days** after I called [Toyota president] Akio



Cygnet collaboration with Toyota is still at the prototype stage

Toyota to discuss this, Toyota's people were visiting our factory at **Gaydon**. Just a few months later and we are making public our intentions.'

- The **Toyota iQ** made its European debut in January. More than **25,000** have been sold so far this year.
- 'This collaboration represents a natural pairing of strategies: a **small yet spacious**

package, perfect for the **city driver**, finished off with Aston Martin's **iconic design language**,' said chief executive and president of Toyota Motor Europe, Tadashi Arashima. 'The Cygnet is a good choice for the Aston Martin owner looking for that **second or third car**, which is **luxurious and eco-conscious**.'