

# Ford's Probe a ray of light for downriver

A friend of mine from Wyandotte made a stab at civic boosterism a few years ago by pointing out that shutting down all the steel mills and chemical plants had improved the air quality, even making the upwind side of Grosse Ile more or less habitable and improving the housing values.

But in a bar on Fort Street there is a sign: "Ecorse, Home of the Brake and the Brave," which is the kind of thing that comes to mind when you are on the wrong side of a real estate boom.

Puddling steel, smuggling booze, making Fords and living with the hope that a strong west wind would blow the toxic fumes over to Canada to clear the air for the weekend softball game pretty much made up life downriver until the whole thing collapsed in the mid-1970s.

That's when domestic car sales went into a tailspin with the energy crisis. That would have done enough damage. But the industry response was to cut car weight by a third, and that meant a third less steel. Engines went from 500 pounds of cast iron to a wimpy 200 pounds or so of iron and aluminum, and with the domestic auto industry already down to using about a quarter as much domestic steel and iron as they had in the 1960s, the big ships started to unload rolls of foreign cold-rolled.

A two-year-old Ford casting plant in Flat Rock was flat shut down before the walls got a chance to get dirty, and the big rolling mills, caught up in corporate acquisitions, bankruptcies and takeovers, started to get those three-letter corporate names that seem to be an early warning the gates are about to close.



auto talk  
**Dan McCosh**

LAST WEEK, we were downriver nursing our knees in a Japanese restaurant, one of those that don't cheat by putting a footwell under the table so you have to sit on your legs until they get numb during the tempura course. The occasion was the second grand opening of the new Mazda plant in Flat Rock, honoring the launch of the new Ford-designed Probe, which somehow seemed slightly less grand than the first opening last fall, when the Japanese

participants in this joint venture first opened the doors for a plant tour.

Regardless, the majority of cars coming out of the Flat Rock facility will be Ford-marketed Probes. The engine and chassis are built in Japan, with the skin the result of the

artful work of Jack Teinack's design staff. It's already the kind of hot car you can sense building a big reputation on the street, and the plant people are scrambling to get a second shift started. Tom Wagner, who recently took over at Ford Division, can put up with a couple of sore knees for this kind of car.

The Flat Rock assembly plant ultimately will employ more than 3,000 and turn out about 200,000 cars annually, including the new Mazda RX6 coupe and the Ford Probe. About half the components are imported from Japan, so the cars don't mean as many jobs as a hot car used to mean. Even the local Ford deal-

ers, which haven't guaranteed the normal employee discount program that usually means a gold mine in unsolicited retail sales, don't see this quite like the old days.

But something better than 50,000 people lined up to get a job at Flat Rock, and one out of 20 succeeded.

It's probably the best thing that's happened in a long time to an area where the best news for the past 20 years or so has been one Miss America, one Playmate of the Year, one good country western song, and too much clean air.

Dan McCosh is the automotive editor of Popular Science.

## Originality best strategy

Once business owners or managers gain access to competitive company data, the next question becomes: "How do we best take advantage of what we now know?"

Typically, any action taken is usually a "reaction" to what major competitors are currently doing or plan on doing in the future.

Examples among retailers include lowering prices on particular products or services in order to beat the competition (price wars).

Many imitate the advertising efforts of others to compete directly with one or more major competitors. In this situation, the advertising message(s), media used and frequency of the ads may be nearly identical, especially when the same or similar customer markets are being pursued.

Other examples include adding or dropping certain product lines along with the competition, following similar recruiting, hiring and training practices or spending the same amount of money by functional area of the business on an annual basis.

Retailers are not the only group that generally rely on reactive competitive strategies in order to compete effectively with the same or similar businesses.



focus: small business

**Mary DiPaolo**

Business service firms, manufacturers, wholesalers and others often depend on this type of strategy as well. Why? Because it is often easier to be imitative than to take an innovative or proactive approach when formulating competitive activities.

MERELY REACTING may be effective in dealing with short-term competitive activities among small businesses. But following this strategy does little, if anything, to help a company plan the best competitive strategy over time.

At the root of any successful competitive strategy is a firm's ability to meet regularly the current and future needs of its targeted customer markets . . . at a profit.

By being innovative, companies can structure their operation to help create its competitive edge rather than riding on some competitor's coattails. Customers are also very astute as to which competitors ac-

tively attempt to satisfy changing customer needs successfully. As a result, these firms get the business — and keep getting business over the long term.

Before a new or existing business begins reacting to what it knows about its competitors, it is recommended that the company also consider what it has done, is doing and plans on doing in the future to satisfy its own markets.

Next week we will look at how companies have successfully used their own as well as competitive data to become innovators in their industries.

Mary DiPaolo is the owner of MarketTrends, a Farmington Hills-based business consulting firm. She is also producer and host of the cable television series, "Focus: The Small Business Environment."

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