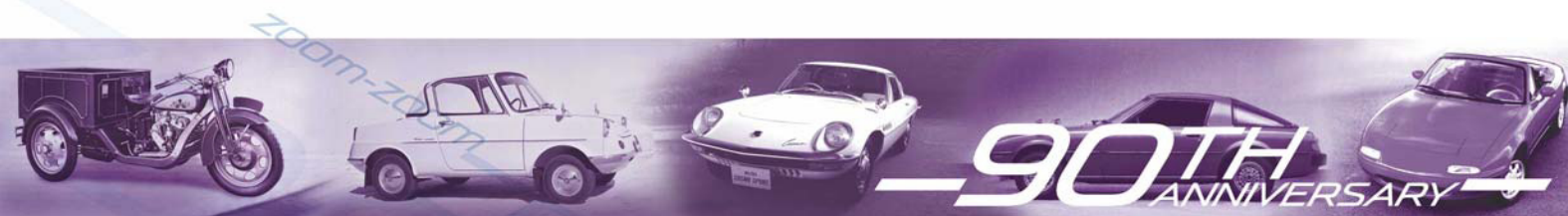


Mazda in Europe 1967 – 1998

On the occasion of Mazda's 90th Anniversary, we take a look back at the history of the brand in Europe. Officially, Mazda began selling cars here in 1967, but nearly a decade of preparation preceded this milestone. Three overseas ventures – Mazda's technical cooperation with Germany's NSU* and Felix Wankel to develop the rotary engine in 1961, and two assembly plants in South Korea in 1962 and in South Africa in 1963 – had proven that Mazda could profit from sales outside of Japan. In 1965, Mazda entered into a second technical cooperation agreement in Europe, this time with the UK company Perkins Services N.V. to develop diesel engines, and first contacts were made with potential independent importers in Western Europe to arrange distribution and sales of future Mazda cars. A first European logistics organisation was set up at the port in Antwerp, Belgium, which would unload cars shipped from Hiroshima, load them on trains or trucks and send them inland. Back in Japan, Mazda opened the Miyoshi Proving Grounds in 1965 where it could test-drive and tune new cars, and a year later the Ujina passenger car assembly plant was completed. Everything was now in place for a full-scale export programme to Europe.

In its first full year in Europe, 1967, Mazda sold a total of 2,688 vehicles in three countries. By 1972 sales had climbed to 50,000 units a year across 18 European countries. In Switzerland, for instance, Mazda sold 134 cars in 1968 and by 1971 sales had risen to 4,750 per year. In Norway, sales volumes rose from 658 to 6,769 units during the same period. In 1969, Rolf Knoch became Mazda's first independent distributor in Austria and sold 181 cars – by 1971 this number had reached 5,483 units, a rise of 2,910 percent!

*NSU Motorenwerke AG was a German manufacturer of cars, motorcycles and pedal cycles.



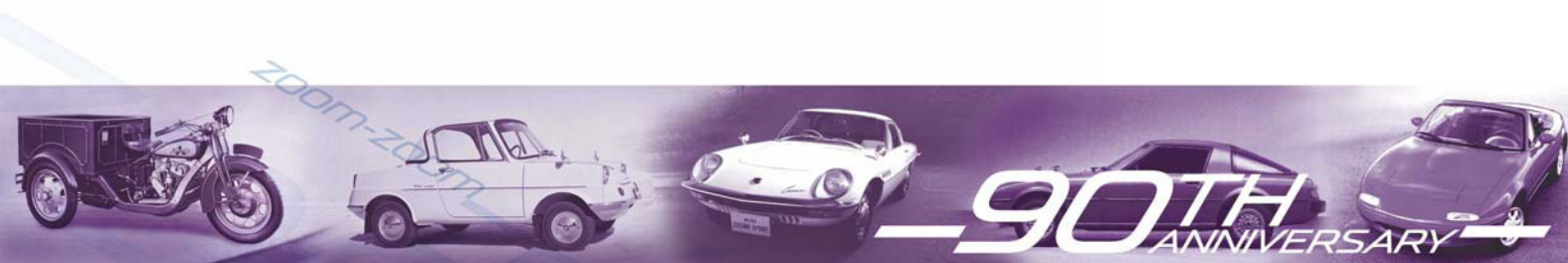
The 1970s – Mazda Germany as a Successful Business Model

In 1972, Mazda quietly sent Masayuki Kirihiro to Düsseldorf, West Germany, to establish a first national sales company (NSC) on the continent. He had visited NSU in 1963 and the dynamics of a country that was still rebuilding itself, like Japan, must have been familiar to him. Less than a year after his arrival, the fledgling company had moved from a small office in Düsseldorf to an empty two-story family home in Hilden nearby (about 15 km south of Düsseldorf). The rest of the decade was spent building a German dealer network. Mazda Germany could rely on an efficient logistics organisation based in Antwerp that had been delivering cars to Western Europe since 1967. When it came to recruiting investors to the Mazda brand, being able to actually drive cars like the Mazda 323, 626 and the rotary sports car RX-3 were great selling-points. But it wouldn't be until 1979 – and the launch of the Mazda RX-7 with a new brand symbol on the front – that Mazda had truly established itself in what was, and still is, Europe's most competitive auto market – Germany.

“Under my direction Mazda developed a reputation as the manufacturer of reliable and affordable cars,” Kirihiro-san said looking back to the early years. “I am very proud that I was responsible for this positive sales start in Europe.”

The 1980s – Expansion, the Catalytic Converter and 24-Hour Service

In just over seven years, Mazda employees had created a thriving company out of nothing in Germany, and sales clicked on all cylinders. The sporty compact Mazda 323 and the family-friendly Mazda 626 were very popular in Germany for their long list of standard features and their competitive price, a perfect combination in terms of value for money. In 1980, company headquarters had grown to 100 employees and moved to larger buildings in Leverkusen-Hitdorf, which is located on the Rhine between Düsseldorf and Cologne. In 1981 Mazda established a representative office in Brussels, which coordinated importers and distributors in European countries. A year later, a young woman was hired by Mazda Germany named Ellen Altmann, who is currently Director of Human Resources and will retire at the end of this year.



“We were about 160 employees altogether,” Altmann, “most of us around 30 years old. Our executives were all Japanese. They were taking German courses at the Goethe Institute and we all spoke German at work. I remember some of our colleagues would work until 11 at night due to the time-difference with Japan where it was six in the morning. We didn’t have internet and the first PCs were introduced in the late 80s. It was long hours of work, but we also celebrated cheerfully every sales record together.”

During the rest of the 1980s, Mazda used affordable vehicle pricing, innovative technologies – it was one of the first to sell cars with catalytic converters (1984) – and its successful German NSC as a basis for its expansion campaign. In 1988 the name of Mazda’s representative office in Brussels was changed to Mazda Motor Europe S.A./N.V and it took over management of the Antwerp harbour facility. That same year a large parts warehouse was built in Hitdorf and a 24-hour delivery service was introduced at Mazda Germany. This was a logical move as Mazda sales were increasing quickly, not only in Germany, but throughout Europe – from about 118,000 units in 1981, to 275,000 units by 1990.

The 1990s – the Icon MX-5 Launched and Mazda Motor Europe Founded

At the start of its third full decade in Europe, Mazda experienced its first real growing pains. Despite the historic launch of the MX-5 roadster in 1990 and high demand for that model, overall sales fell due to a lack of new high-volume models. Despite this, Mazda went on the offensive in Europe by building a new European R&D Centre in Oberursel, Germany (1990),



and by winning the Le Mans 24 Hours (1991) with a rotary-engine car (Mazda remains the only Japanese maker to have won this classic test of speed and endurance). In 1992 Mazda Germany moved into its current headquarters in Leverkusen-Hitdorf. At the time there were about 450 employees, a third of them working in the warehouse and parts centre next to the new building.

“I still can remember the celebration we had laying the cornerstone for our new headquarters.” recalls Ellen Altmann, “Norio Fujimoto, our third Managing Director, gave his speech in



German, a language he knew very well.”

When a second NSC was established in Portugal in 1995, Mazda embarked on a strategy to acquire the independent distribution operations in key European markets. Most of its sales operations were still stand-alone businesses, each with their own parts depots, vehicle storage facilities and business philosophies. This was about to change. In 1998, Mazda’s European part centre was consolidated into Mazda Motor Europe S.A./N.V and its European representative office in Brussels – that had managed Mazda’s independent distributors since 1988 – was transferred to Leverkusen-Hitdorf in Germany. This paved the way for the founding of Mazda Motor Europe GmbH, which began operations later that year with just eight employees working in the same building as Mrs. Altmann and her German colleagues. First President and CEO of the new organisation was Norwegian Jan Brentebraten, and under his direction English gradually began to replace German as the language spoken at company headquarters. That same year, Mazda Motor Logistics Europe N.V was founded in Willebroek, Belgium, not far from Mazda’s port in Antwerp. With these new organisations in place, Mazda began a period of unprecedented growth in Europe with the dawn of the new millennium.

To be continued...

Read about the growth of Mazda in Europe from 1999 to the present in our next release.

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Did you know?

Mazda launched its **first rotary-engine car** in 1967, the **Mazda Cosmo Sport 110S**.

[Learn more about Mazda’s history online ►](#)



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