

# Prius may fizzle due to Toyota timidity

Iconic hybrid should be company's tech flagship

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Toyota is wasting an icon, allowing an historic vehicle to slide into irrelevance.

The Prius gasoline-electric hybrid revolutionized the auto industry, until Toyota decided to rest on its laurels.

The 2023 Prius is arguably the best hybrid you can buy, but being the best hybrid barely qualifies as a consolation prize in a world that's moved on to electric vehicles, largely without Toyota.

That's a disservice to a nameplate that belongs alongside - or above - Corolla, Camry and Tacoma in the pantheon of great Toyotas.

The Prius changed the auto industry, and how people think of Toyota. The first generation - introduced in Japan in 1997, the U.S. 2001 - was a dowdy econobox, but Prius II, introduced in 2003, was a monumental achievement, arguably the most advanced - and certainly the most environmentally conscious - vehicle in the world.

Celebrities lined up to be seen arriving at fancy events in Priuses. It was a halo vehicle that brightened prospects for everything Toyota made, accelerating its decades of steady growth into a

leap to become the world's largest automaker.

Icons don't come along every day

The Prius is to Toyota as the Model T and Mustang are to Ford, the Wrangler is to Jeep and the Beetle was to Volkswagen: Vehicles that define their makers and embody the values to which they aspire.

Automakers agonize over changes to those vehicles. But Ford and Jeep have transformed the Mustang and Wrangler in recent years.

Ford's decision went all the way to the CEO's desk, but the automaker eventually attached the cherished pony car name to the Mustang Mach-E electric SUV.

It was an instant hit, winning awards and em-

ing perceptions of Ford as an EV laggard.

Jeep resisted market trends for years before adding a four-door version of the Wrangler, only to see that Wrangler Unlimited model increase sales and reach three-fourths of production. Jeep later made the Wrangler its first plug-in hybrid model, and saw the 4xe become America's best-selling PHEV.

Icons that rusted and faded away include the Model T and Beetle. The Model T wasn't just the car that put America on wheels and created the middle class. At one point, more than half the automobiles in the world were Model Ts. The VW Beetle was Europe's first mass-market vehicle. It helped put post-war Germany on wheels,

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revitalizing the country's shattered industrial sector along the way.

Electrification began with Prius

Brilliant achievements of engineering and business acumen, the Model T and Beetle both stagnated because the companies that created them didn't have a follow-up. Ford built the Model T virtually unchanged from 1908 to 1927. Not to be outdone, VW produced Beetles that stuck to the original car's formula from 1938 to 2003. By the end of its run, the affordable, reliable family car, though, was relegated to being built at a single plant in Mexico, for use as a taxi, with the front passenger seat ripped out.

The new-Beetle revival was fan fiction, a car that looked like a Beetle but lacked its space efficiency, innovation and practicality. And now it's gone too.

Vehicles whose silhouettes were synonymous with efficient modern transportation became quaint, then extinct.

Once a leader, the Prius is at risk of be-



Auto critic Mark Phelan says 2023 Toyota Prius may be the best hybrid, but the world has moved on to electric vehicles. MARK PHELAN/USA TODAY NETWORK

coming a relic too.

The Prius changed the auto industry because it was simultaneously the cleanest vehicle on the road and affordable to the vast majority of drivers.

If you want to be a leader, you have to lead

Toyota calls the 2023 Prius that goes on sale next month "the hybrid reborn," but it's an exercise in incrementalism: 1 mpg more

fuel efficient, a sportier design, more power, quicker to 60 mph.

It's a testament to yesterday's best ideas, the best CD player in a download world.

Toyota may be right to keep refining hybrid tech, improving and adding the feature across its lineup. There will be a market for hybrids for years.

Doing it under the Prius banner is a mistake, however. A new Prius should be Toyota's technical flagship, a bold statement that the world's biggest automaker

also leads in vision and innovation.

"Toyota is resting on its laurels after the success of the Prius hybrid, refusing to innovate and produce pollution-free electric vehicles. The company's opposition to zero-emission vehicle mandates, including its global anti-climate lobbying efforts, is a harbinger of Toyota losing its edge and along with it, its faithful customers and green image," said East Peterson-Trujillo, clean vehicles campaigner for Public Citizen.

Why doesn't Toyota build the most efficient, longest range, most affordable electric vehicle in the world, and why doesn't it bear the Prius badge? Instead, Toyota's scotches into making EVs have been halting at best.

Maybe Toyota's corporate culture doesn't have another revolutionary idea in it. Maybe lightning won't strike twice in the same corporate offices.

But the burden of leadership is that you have to actually lead, evolve and take risks.

The Prius made Toyota the world's leading automaker in many ways.

If a lack of imagination or daring keeps Toyota from even attempting to regain that mantle, the company's leaders will have nobody but themselves to blame when other automakers pass it by.