



AUTOMOTIVE NEWS EUROPE

Unternehmen

Automotive News Europe | United Kingdom | 01.08.2019 | Reach: 78000

AUTOMOTIVE NEWS EUROPE

FINAL WORD

Christiaan Hetzner

is Germany correspondent at
Automotive News Europe.
He can be reached at
chetzner@autonews.com.



He will decide the 911's fate

Frank-Steffen Walliser might have the most enviable job at Porsche – and the most challenging. The Stuttgart native has been given the keys to the brand's most iconic sports car, figuratively. The 911 was Porsche's No. 4-selling vehicle by volume last year, but the car defines the brand and all of its sister models derive their legitimacy from its aura.

This spring Walliser, a career Porsche manager, took over as head of the 911 model line from August Achleitner, who held the role for 18 years during which time he engineered three successive generations of Porsche's famous coupe.

Product line heads enjoy a great deal of autonomy at Porsche. They are responsible for meeting all product-related goals on time and within budget, from technical to financial and everything in between. They also have full control over the purse strings. "Practically speaking, we form a company within a company," said Achleitner, whose parting advice to his successor was "trust the team to do its job."

Walliser, who turns 50 this month, has an impeccable resume. After receiving a doctorate with honors in industrial sci-

ence, he rose through the Porsche ranks to become project leader for the 918 Spyder plug-in hybrid, a vehicle that helped push Porsche toward creating the Taycan full-electric grand tourer. Along with developing Porsche's GT and Cup cars, Walliser was also director of motor sports.

One of the key challenges he will eventually have to tackle is how to take the 911 forward in the looming electric era. In about three years, development will begin on the next generation 911, which will be sold past 2030. CEO Oliver Blume has indicated that by then Porsche could be a full-electric brand.

Not always an icon

The dilemma Walliser and Porsche face is that the 911's entire positioning in the market revolves around being the only vehicle in its segment powered by a six-cylinder boxer engine mounted over the rear axle. Achleitner said it was this irreplaceable peculiarity that allowed what at one point was a technologically obsolete sports car to be successfully transformed into the ultimate luxury sports car it is today. "The 911 wasn't always an icon," he said.

True, Porsche has been able to update the vehicle, for example to meet ever more stringent CO2 targets in Europe, while also growing sales. There was an outcry when Porsche shifted from naturally aspirated to turbocharged engines, yet demand remains strong as ever.

But it feels as if Porsche has reached the end of credible changes. Historically, the 356 was replaced by the 911 in order to shift from four to a more powerful six-cylinder setup. Downsizing the engine and adding an electric booster to compensate for the lost output might be acceptable to some, but it would likely be a bridge too far for 911 enthusiasts.

It is these purists, who pay a huge sum for the 911's unique mix of attributes, that give the model its oversized profit margins and by extension bestow desirability on the rest of the product portfolio. Aware of their importance to the brand, Blume has said Porsche will build the 911 as long as the company is allowed.

By the time Achleitner stepped down from his post, he had changed his mind about the concept of an all-electric 911. Not only was it conceivable, it was preferable to eliminating a nameplate in which Porsche has invested so heavily over decades. But it will be up to Walliser to make this decision.

"What is the right path to take with electrification?" Walliser asked. "How does this look in the future and how do we actually achieve it given the process isn't something that can be completed over the next two or three years?"

Boasting impressive performance metrics for the classic straight line sprint won't be enough in the future, either. "Anyone will be able to do that soon enough. That is no longer a differentiator," Walliser said. An electric 911 must feel and handle like a pure-bred sports car. "There are other ways to set oneself apart and our task will be distilling those typical Porsche attributes into an electrified vehicle." Solving that conundrum will be his top priority should the 911 avoid the fate of the 356. **ANE**



One of the key conundrums Walliser will have to overcome is how to take the 911 forward in the looming electric era.

