
Audi Ireland's Thorsten Godulla: 'The future is fully electric'

[Audi Ireland](#) MD Thorsten Godulla talks to ThinkBusiness about how the car giant is accelerating a full move to electric and has surpassed its 2020 CO2 targets.

Back in December 2019, Thorsten Godulla, managing director of Audi Ireland and I hatched a plan. Sitting in Dublin's One Pico restaurant at the press journalists' Christmas dinner the conversation turned to running. Knowing we were both keen runners, a plan was percolating. Little did we know then that an unheard-of virus was quietly making its indiscriminating progress towards us in Europe.

Fast forward to February 2021 and I'm speaking with Audi Ireland's boss once more. Only this time, like the rest of us, it's through a virtual meeting.

Much has changed since December 2019 including Audi's core brand messaging. Where previously Godulla was welcoming electrification with an eye on continuing to actively market petrol and diesel combustion engine offerings, in 2021 the Audi message is fully electric.

Driving an all-electric brand

The new Audi RS e-tron GT

“These cars (fully electric) are absolutely crucial for the Audi brand message. By 2025 we want to have 20 fully electric Audi cars in each market. Now it’s the e-tron Sportback, the e-tron 50 quattro SUV, etron and the Q4 e-tron. All of these cars contribute to meet our CO2 goals which require a lot of effort,” he says.

“Future is an attitude that will raise the Audi brand again. The key objectives and positioning of the brand will be the successful launch of two new brand heroes – the e-tron GT (likely to start at around €100,000 in Ireland) and the Q4 e-tron. For Audi and the VW group, they need to go the electric route. In Ireland in 2020 we sold 107 Audi e-trons.”

Objectively this number represents a premium conquest for the German brand with the e-tron range starting from €77,550 excluding grants.” In Norway, the Audi e-tron was the bestselling car in 2020. For the first time fully electric vehicle sales overtook internal combustion engine cars grabbing 54.3pc in that market.

Common with Mercedes, BMW and Audi is the core marketing messaging that is robustly moving towards kilowatts and away from the nebulous message of cool lifestyle or ubiquitous mobile connectivity.

“We have the youngest portfolio in the premium segment,” says Godulla, now getting into his stride, “we have a good starting point for 2021 and these pillars like etron GT, not of course big volume but for the brand it’s like when we launched the Audi R8. This was something new for the brand. Or when we launched the TT – you have models like that.”

The Audi Q4 e-tron will use Volkswagen’s MED (modular electrification platform) for electric models and prices are yet to be confirmed at going to press.

We understand the expected price may be just below the Q5 mid-size SUV and marketed as a fully electric small luxury crossover. Using two electric motors, one on each axle it will offer all-wheel drive with 225 kWh and 330 lb ft torque.

Audi claims the performance of 0-100 km/h in 6.3 seconds with an 82 kWh battery pack and 450 kms range and 80 per cent charge in approx 30 minutes. “So for every customer there is something.” says Godulla. “The salesperson should identify the customers’ needs like ‘How are you driving each day? Can you charge at home?’ If you have the chance to charge your car like your mobile phone it’s an automatic choice.”

Accelerating past Covid

How did 2020 impact Audi Ireland? “It was a challenging year for all the importers and dealers in Ireland, with the market down around 25 per cent. 2020 was still a year when imports came in from

the UK. The hope is that it (imports) is more regulated with now a 10 per cent duty on UK imports from the UK”

2020 saw Audi beat BMW by 231 new car sales, coming in with a final tally of 1,074. Unsurprisingly Godulla focuses on segment than market share.

“I don’t want to talk so much about market share because market share depends on the total market, and which channels our cars registered, the rent a car business was only done in Jan, Feb and a little in March – then it was gone. This impacts the total automotive market in Ireland. For me, it’s about maintaining the number one position in the premium segment this year.

“In 2020 we were forced to look at tools to deal with and sell to customers. For the 12th year in a row Audi leads the Premium Segment with a very strong performance. 2020 was the first full year of the Audi e-tron. Globally in Quarter 4 it was the best quarter ever Audi had from a sales perspective - 505,573 sales in Quarter 4 worldwide.

“When you look at the numbers in February everything decreased and China came back out of Covid fast. In Europe, in June and July it was a very strong performance when we collected orders and then delivered in the fourth quarter. Audi sales worldwide were 8.3pc below the previous year.”

How has Covid-19 and the slow but steady adoption of plug-in-hybrids and fully electric vehicles on the market worked? “The average distance to work in Ireland is 15km – that’s 60pc of people. A plug-in-hybrid vehicle (PHEV) is perfect for you. But if you need to go to, say, County Kerry you can still do it with an ICE engine (petrol or diesel).”

Exceeding CO2 targets

Much has been reported of car manufactures missing the strict CO2 total fleet emissions target set by the EU for 2020.

“Audi achieved the CO2 targets for 2020.” confirms Godulla “Compared with all cars sold in 2019 we reduced our CO2 by 20 per cent. This has to do with the performance of the Audi e-tron (107 cars sold in Ireland – and 47,000 global sales of e-tron). When you look at the price of the car (from €77,550) it really is a good performance.

“Norway by 2025 will sell no more ICE (petrol or diesel) cars. Last year in 2020 it was the first time more electric vehicles had been sold in Norway than ICE cars. ICE was 48 per cent and the most successful car in Norway was the Audi e-tron.”

For business users which finance package does he recommend when considering a new car? “For business users in Ireland it’s still very much focused on PCP but when you look at other countries leasing is still more established as a tool to finance a car.

“For SMEs the lease product is the best way to finance because you have no hassle. You have your monthly leasing fees and after three years you hand the car back.

“Everything is covered with the service packages so from a fleet perspective SMEs have a perfect package and you know how much you’re paying with service and maintenance included. After three years you also don’t have a discussion about equity.”

For the business owner, which non-crossover/SUVs does Godulla recommend?

“The Audi A6 is two years in the market and extremely popular as is the Audi A3. If you travel across the country regularly then a diesel engine is still the right thing because we know how effective a diesel is.”

Room to vroom

I ask if a fully electric car is a legitimate choice with Irish buyers still grappling with an inconsistent and patchy electric charging network. “There is room for improvement regarding charging infrastructure. As you move away from Dublin you need to plan your journey. The VW group has a partnership with IONITY (the Munich based joint venture between Audi, Volkswagen, BMW, Mercedes, Ford and Hyundai). They have installed 6 Irish high-speed chargers. You can charge in 20 minutes. Now the ESB is stepping in. They are updating their charging network and updating the 7kW chargers to 22kW chargers.”

I suggest we need high speed-chargers throughout all of Ireland. Godulla disagrees - “You don’t need high speed chargers everywhere. I would install chargers at hotels to make them more attractive (destinations). If you know the hotel has a charging point then you are relaxed. Every

evening you can charge. Our survey shows 80pc of people charge at home or at work. The Irish government gives a grant of €600 for a wall box installation. If I were a private buyer I'd do this now."

Godulla's rise to the top followed a traditional economics route. "I did an apprenticeship as a clerk in a bank and then I went back to university and studied economics, with accounting as the key topic, and then I started to work for Audi in 1994. Between 2004 and 2007 I did work with Audi in Milton Keynes as brand controller for Audi in England. In 2007 I went back to Germany and worked in sales and since then I worked in sales in Europe and the Middle East. I then moved to Ireland in Oct 2018."

2021 will be a pivotal year for the German brand and speaking with Godulla the importance of electrification appears paramount. The acid test will be how the fully electric adoption during 2021 manifests into actual conquest sales over new diesel-engined cars. Last year diesel dominated the Irish new car market with 42.32pc sales. Yet, fully electric cars managed just 2.91pc of that pie. As for that planned run together smothered by successive Covid restrictions, it remains a work in progress.

Interview by Mark Gallivan

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