Marketing Doctor

Marketing Check-up

Tesla

As of May 27, 2025

Condition: Under treatment

When the founder becomes the brand

Tesla built one of the world's most valuable car brands with very little traditional advertising. Its chief executive, Elon Musk, was the channel: every launch, post and interview did the marketing. In 2025 Musk's role in the U.S. government drew protests to Tesla sites, Tesla fell near the bottom of a national reputation ranking and its sales fell in Europe while the electric car market grew. We take no side on the politics. This check-up looks at the marketing question: what happens when the founder becomes the brand.

Key takeaways

- Musk has long been Tesla's best-known marketer. In 2025 his prominent government role drew protests to Tesla showrooms and service centres.
- Tesla fell to 95th of 100 in the Axios Harris Poll 100, from 63rd a year earlier and 8th in 2021. Axios reported that Republicans viewed Musk's companies more favourably than Democrats did.
- In the EU, Tesla registrations fell 46.1% from January to April 2025 while battery-electric registrations rose 26.4%. Buyers kept choosing electric cars; more of them chose another brand.
- A founder who acts as the brand's main channel carries every public stance into the buying decision. Founder-led brands need a promise that stands apart from one person.

Marketing health check

Area	Finding
Founder channel	Double-edged. The CEO's public role now reaches the showroom door.
Reputation	Falling. 95th of 100 in the Axios Harris Poll.
Customer base	Split along party lines, by Axios's reporting.
Category share	Losing ground in a growing electric car market in Europe.
Product	In transition. A Model Y changeover cost several weeks of production.

Timeline

When	What happened
2021	Tesla ranks 8th in the Axios Harris Poll 100.
2024	Tesla ranks 63rd.
Early 2025	Musk takes a prominent role in the U.S. Department of Government Efficiency.
Mar 29, 2025	Tesla Takedown protests target Tesla sites in the U.S. and abroad.
Q1 2025	Deliveries fall 13% from a year earlier.
Jan to Apr 2025	EU Tesla registrations fall 46.1% while battery-electric registrations rise 26.4%.
Apr 22, 2025	Musk says he will allocate far more of his time to Tesla.
May 20, 2025	Tesla ranks 95th in the Axios Harris Poll 100.

What happened: the founder's role reached the showroom

Elon Musk has long been Tesla's best-known marketer. In 2025 he also took on a prominent role in the Department of Government Efficiency in Washington. People who opposed that work took their protest to Tesla. On March 29 the Tesla Takedown movement aimed to surround all 277 Tesla showrooms and service centres in the U.S. and rally at more than 230 Tesla sites in other countries, the Associated Press reported.

We take no side on the politics. The marketing question is simpler: the CEO's public role now reaches the showroom door. Tesla's own quarterly update named "changing political sentiment,"

alongside trade policy, as a factor that could affect demand. On April 22 Musk said: "Starting next month, I'll be allocating far more of my time to Tesla."

The diagnosis: a brand split along party lines

- **One channel, every stance.** A founder who is the main channel brings everything they say and do into the buying decision, whether the company intends it or not.
- **A narrower pool of buyers.** In the Axios Harris Poll 100, Axios reported that "Republicans expressed more favorable opinions than did Democrats" of Musk's largest companies. A mass-market car brand needs buyers from every part of the electorate.
- **Meaning outside the product.** Part of what the brand means now sits outside the cars. That is a positioning problem as much as a sales problem.
- **Other factors too.** A fair competitor analysis would also weigh new electric rivals and the Model Y changeover, which Tesla said cost "several weeks of production."

The treatment: a promise that stands apart from one person

Tesla's products, charging network and software are strong reasons to buy on their own. The treatment is to make those reasons the message: write down what the brand promises apart from any one person, using a brand messaging framework, and build channels beyond the founder's own posts. Then track brand health by market and customer segment, so a split shows up before it reaches sales.

The result: lower sales and a lower ranking

Tesla delivered 336,681 vehicles in the first quarter of 2025, 13% fewer than a year earlier, and automotive revenue fell 20%. In the EU, Tesla registrations fell 46.1% from January to April 2025, while battery-electric registrations rose 26.4%. A brand that loses ground while its category grows is bleeding share.

Its reputation fell too: Tesla ranked 95th of America's 100 most visible companies in the 2025 Axios Harris Poll, down from 63rd a year earlier and 8th in 2021.

Lessons for your marketing

1. A founder can be a brand's best channel. Plan for the day the founder's public role carries into the buying decision.
2. Write down what the brand promises apart from any one person, and make the product the hero of the message.
3. Track brand health by market and by customer segment, not just in total.
4. Watch your share of a growing category, not just your own sales. Losing share while the market grows is an early warning.
5. Build more than one channel to your customers.

The doctor will see you now.

Book a free marketing check-up at marketingdoctor.ca/contact. We'll examine your marketing, show you what's holding growth back and prescribe what to fix first.

Sources

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