



Youthful Prasan Firodia, MD, Force Motors has planned nothing less than a complete transformation of his company.

Interview
Sridhar Chari

‘We are planning to invest Rs 1,000 crore over the next three years’

It has been slightly more than a year since you took charge of Force Motors. What have you and the company been up to during this period?

PRASAN FIRODIA: Taking a broad brush, we have been working at transforming our company from being a product development-centric organisation to a market-centric outfit. As such, we are introducing fresh blood into the company. Today 60 percent of employees may be labeled young and they are bursting with innovative ideas. Simultaneously, going with this internal change, we are revamping our distribution network. This is by supporting dealers with investments and training as well as specifying proper standards for after sales service. We will also suitably delineate front-ends based on customer profiles. We do not expect a dealer to sell both the Trump and the new SUV in one outlet.

Now that the MAN-FORCE JV is ready to take off, we have been getting down to make our current product portfolio more contemporary. The fact of the matter is that, we have been very strong with our hardy, functional vehicles. Now, however, as we are moving towards BS IV norms, the time is right to offer a product portfolio that is more relevant in the urban context.

As such, we now have significant plans across our product range, inclusive of the upcoming SUV, Traveller, Trax, Trump and our Balwan range of farm tractors.

Let us start with the Traveller. Where is it going from a strategic perspective?

FIRODIA: There is huge demand for the Traveller. In fact, we think that the product, when it was launched was ahead of its times and has truly matured only now. While the market needs approximately 1,500 units, due to certain component shortages, we are able to supply only 1,000 units. About two years ago, demand for the product was just 350 units per month. But, the key is that we are looking forward to the BSIV version to be available from November.

It comes with a completely localised 2.2 litre CRDi Mercedes engine and with a matching 320Nm transmission. The entire body structure has been re-engineered on "Computer Aided Design" basis. Long-



Abhay Firodia, Chairman, Force Motors receiving the 'CV Man of the Year' Award from Hoshan Billimoria, MD, Next Gen Publishing Ltd.



Trump 40 now attracts demand in the order of 2,000 units per month. But the company is unable to meet it entirely because of supplier constraints.

er wheel base options are now offered. Its front would also receive a complete facelift. This new offering, though slightly more expensive than the Euro III version, is in the long run, hugely value for money. Not only will the vehicle have superb NVH characteristics, but also be 14-15 percent more fuel-efficient.

As mentioned earlier, in deciding to make the Traveller contemporary, we will have two trims with the product. While the BSIII version shall be capable of taking on

overloading as seen in traditional markets, the BSIV version equally rugged, shall be targeted at premium applications such as ambulances and the hospitality sector, where performance and not overload capability be the emphasis.

What are your thoughts about applying the Traveller as a mini-bus for in-city transport?

FIRODIA: Getting into such a business requires the issuance of permits from lo-→



After a long inning, the Matador has gone into the history books.



The company is targeting premium applications such as ambulances and the hospitality sector, where emphasis is on performance and not on overload capability.

cal authorities. These are typically hard to come by. Secondly, the seating range of the Traveller may need to be increased from the current 9-21 seaters if we are to make an effective pitch for this space.

Will the upcoming SUV use the same engine as the Traveller?

FIRODIA: Yes, the Rs 10-15 lakh SUV will use basically the same engine and transmission, except that the drive train's

performance characteristics would be modulated in line with the application. The product, currently undergoing trials will be launched in the first half of next fiscal. In many ways, its launch will both demand and guide a new way of thinking with respect to product development, customer interfaces and sales promotion activities. This is an important new development by FORCE. The chassis and driveline are engineered from clean sheet status. The

superstructure is modern and the interiors will be contemporary.

What is the game plan for the Trax range?

FIRODIA: The Trax range too has picked up; we have an order book of 1,500 units. Within the company there is a strong awareness of the Trax being a robust functional product. But, that said, the product shall get its due in terms of competent BSIII engines. Other small improvements shall be added in the shape of seats, a moulded roof, a new dash board and improved creature comforts such as a stereo system and a mobile charger.

Would you say that the Trump has trumped the market?

FIRODIA: Since we did not have an apple-apple product to take on the market leader in the SCV segment, we thought of ushering in both the Trump 40 and Trump 15 in the 1.1 and 0.8 tonne payload capacities. While the latter will take a while to pick up, the Trump 40 has really taken off with minimal promotional activity.

Its robust 3-cylinder engine and strong construction allows us to offer an unprecedented 3,00,000 km warranty. The product

Force Motors has significant plans for its Balwan range of farm tractors





The Traveller has a dominating presence in the ambulance market.

now attracts demand in the order of 2,000 units per month but, we are unable to meet it entirely because of supplier constraints.

Given that you have temporarily decided to dispense with production of the Minidor, would you look at other SCVs to give company to the Trump?

FIRODIA: The decision to dispense with the Minidor was in the light of the switch to newer emission norms. The cost economics of using a BSIV engine on the vehicle do not stack up.

We are looking at extending the Trump range with a passenger variant. Also in the pipeline is the development of our home-grown BSIV compliant CRDi engine that could power a new range of three or four wheelers.

How is the macro picture looking for Force Motors

FIRODIA: We expect to close this year with a 60% growth in turnover on a very conservative basis. We have a very healthy balance-sheet, which gives us the confidence to invest in future products.

In fact, we are planning to invest Rs 1,000 crore over the next three years. Part of this investment will also go into the setting up of a new plant for the upcoming range of SCVs. A third location is under consideration.

Now, let us talk about Jaya Hind Industries, in which you first cut your teeth. How has this auto comp maker been performing?

FIRODIA: Jaya Hind Industries is also doing well. We are all set to notch up a turnover of Rs 320 crore this year, over the

Rs 198 crore garnered last year.

Jaya Hind has four divisions - high pressure die casting, gravity die casting, auto components and fabrication. So far as high pressure die casting is concerned our focus is on large parts. The majority of our machines are 800 tonnes and above and they go up to 3500 tonnes. We make parts weighing 20g to 32 kg apiece. Key products put out by this process include engine blocks, bed plates, transmission cases and fully machined oil pans. The effort is to entrench our position in a business which has high entry costs. For instance, each heavy machine costs Rs 20 crore. To further intensify our focus in this area, we are in the process of sewing up an alliance with our technical partner Kolben Schmidt - ATAG. Thus far, they have focused on making cylinder blocks for premium car brands. But, that end of the market has →

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Firodia says that the company is looking to cater to 75 percent of MAN- FORCE's requirements for tipper bodies.



taken a hit. Therefore, they intend to get into more mass market products, using our frugal engineering skills. So far, as we are concerned, we get a valuable front end in developed markets.

Coming to gravity die casting, we are the largest producer of aluminum cylinder heads in India, which are common rail technology compatible and that is our focus. The third division at Jaya Hind focuses on auto components including, brakes, clutches, for after market and for OEs. The fourth division is fabrication, where we now make tippers for MAN-FORCE trucks. We make both rock body 'mining' tippers and box body 'construction' tippers. Currently 4-5 different types of tippers are being marketed. Over the next 6-8 months, we aim to cater to 75 percent of MAN- FORCE's requirements.

I understand the engines fitted on the Mercedes cars manufactured in India are assembled at Force Motors, How is that business doing?

FIRODIA: Force Motors and Daimler have a long and fruitful association which extends way back into the early eighties. Fully aware of our strength in terms of engineering infrastructure and capabilities they asked us to set up a dedicated facility for assembling and testing engines for Mercedes passenger cars to be made in India. Till date we have supplied over 21,000 engines. The warranty on engine assembly and testing is with FORCE and it is a matter of pride that till date we have had no failures or complaints. This business has now grown to a substantial size as we have over the last two years also added axles (both front and rear) of the C and E class passenger cars. ■