

32. The Model S

In 2009, Elon Musk was determined to transition Tesla into a significant automaker with the launch of the Model S, a mass-produced, four-door sedan priced at around \$60,000. This ambition marked a pivotal moment in Tesla's journey, aiming to lead in the electric-vehicle era. However, designing a visually appealing sedan proved more challenging than the sports car aesthetics of the Roadster, leading Musk to initially contract and subsequently dismiss Henrik Fisker, a renowned designer, over creative disagreements on the car's design, particularly due to the space requirements of the battery pack.

Musk then recruited Franz von Holzhausen, a designer with a robust portfolio from Volkswagen, GM, and Mazda, to head Tesla's in-house design studio. Von Holzhausen's collaboration with Musk was pivotal, paralleling iconic partnerships like Steve Jobs and Jony Ive, focusing on blending aesthetic appeal with engineering innovation. Under von Holzhausen's direction, Tesla integrated the design and engineering teams to foster a cohesive approach to the Model S development. This holistic strategy led to the innovative placement of the battery pack under the car's floor, contributing to a lower center of gravity and enhanced structural integrity, despite significant technical challenges.

Drew Baglino, tasked with the battery's development, faced Musk's demanding expectations to reduce the number of battery cells while maintaining the car's range. Musk's rigorous approach extended to other aspects of the Model S's design, insisting on novel features like retractable door handles to craft a user-friendly and emotionally engaging vehicle. Despite Musk's contentious stance on adhering to traditional regulations, demonstrated by his disdain for mandated passenger safety warnings, the Model S evolved under his vision to not only meet but exceed conventional automotive standards.

The Model S's development journey underscores the synergy between visionary leadership and innovative engineering, encapsulating Tesla's mission to redefine the automotive landscape. Musk's relentless pursuit of excellence, despite potential setbacks, played a crucial role in crafting a vehicle that not only met aesthetic and performance standards but also laid the foundation for Tesla's future in the electric vehicle industry.