

## Failure Case for ENTR200 Class Discussion

Based on <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edsel> accessed 12/13/07



The **Edsel** was a make of automobile manufactured by the [Ford Motor Company](#) during the 1958, 1959, and 1960 model years. The car brand is best known as one of the most spectacular failures in the history of the [United States](#) automobile industry.

## History

### Background



Ford Vice President of Design [George Walker](#), right, talks to I.B. "Bud" Kaufman, a member of the E-Car design team, in the mid-1950s



Edsel Citation Convertible 1958



Edsel Convertible



Edsel Convertible



Edsel Pacer 2-Door HT 1958



1959 Edsel Corsair Convertible

In the early 1950s, Ford Motor Co. became a publicly traded [corporation](#) that was no longer entirely owned by members of the Ford family and was able to sell cars without being hindered by [Henry Ford's](#) antiquated preferences following the sellers' market of the

postwar years. The new management compared the roster of Ford makes with that of [General Motors](#), and noted that [Lincoln](#) competed not with [Cadillac](#), but with [Oldsmobile](#). So since Ford had a lot of money on hand from the success of the [Ford Thunderbird](#) the plan was developed to move Lincoln upmarket and put another make in beneath it, with yet another model, the Continental, at the very top. Research and development had begun in 1955 under the name "E-car," which stood for "Experimental car." This represented a new division of the firm alongside that of Ford itself and the [Lincoln-Mercury](#) division, whose cars at the time shared the same body.

The Edsel was introduced amidst a considerable amount of publicity on "E Day"—[September 4, 1957](#). It was promoted by a top-rated television special, [The Edsel Show](#) on [October 13](#), but it was not enough to counter the adverse public reaction to the car's styling and conventional build; the rumors that Ford had circulated led consumers to expect an entirely new kind of car when in reality the Edsel shared its bodywork with other Ford models.

The Edsel was to be sold through a new Ford division. It existed from November 1956 until January 1958, after which Edsels were made by the Mercury-Edsel-Lincoln division (referred to as **M-E-L**). Edsel was sold through a new network of 1,500 dealers. This briefly brought total dealers of all Ford products to 10,000. Ford saw this as a way to come closer to parity with the other two companies of the Big Three: [Chrysler](#) had 10,000 dealers and [General Motors](#) had 16,000. As soon as it became apparent that the Edsels were not selling, many of these dealers added Lincoln-Mercury, English Ford and/or [Taunus](#) dealerships to their lines with the encouragement of Ford Motor Company. Some dealers, however, closed.

For the 1958 model year, Edsel produced four models, including the larger Mercury-based [Citation](#) and [Corsair](#), and the smaller, more affordable Ford-based [Pacer](#) and [Ranger](#). The Citation came in two-door and four-door hardtops and two-door convertible versions. The Corsair came in two-door and four-door hardtop versions. The Pacer came in two-door and four-door hardtops, four-door [sedan](#), and two-door convertible. The Ranger came in two-door and four-door hardtop or sedan versions. The four-door [Bermuda](#) and [Villager](#) wagons and the two-door [Roundup](#) wagon were based on the 116" wheelbase Ford station wagon platform and shared the trim and features of the Ranger and Pacer models. It included several features that were, at the time, cutting-edge

innovations, among which were its "rolling dome" speedometer and its [Teletouch](#) transmission shifting system, on the center of the steering wheel. Other, less-touted but more enduring design innovations included a primitive attempt at ergonomically designed controls for the driver, and self-adjusting brakes (often claimed as a first for the industry, although this was not so—[Studebaker](#) had pioneered them earlier in the decade).

In the first year, 63,110 Edsels were sold in the U.S. with another 4,935 sold in Canada. Though this was below expectations, it was still the second largest car launch for any brand to date, second only to the [Plymouth](#) introduction in 1928.

For the 1959 model year, there were only two Edsels: the Ranger and the Corsair, which was really a relabeled Pacer. The two larger cars were not produced. The new Corsair came in two-door and four-door hardtops, four-door sedan, and two-door convertible. The Ranger came in two-door and four-door hardtops, two-door and four-door sedans, and the Villager station wagon. In the 1959 model year, 44,891 cars were sold in the U.S., with an additional 2,505 sales in Canada.

For the 1960 model year, Edsel's last, only the Ranger and Villager were produced. The 1960 Edsel, in its final model year, emerged as a Ford. Its grill, hood, and four taillights, along with its side sweep spears, were the only real differences separating the Edsel from the Ford.

## **End of the Edsel**

Ford announced the end of the Edsel program on Thursday, [November 19, 1959](#). However, cars continued being produced until late in November, with the final tally at 2,846 1960 models.

On Friday, November 20, [United Press International](#)'s (UPI) wire service reported that book values for used Edsels had decreased by as much as \$400 [approximately \$2800 in 2006 dollars] (based on condition and age) immediately following the Ford press release. In some newspaper markets, dealers scrambled to renegotiate newspaper advertising contracts involving the 1960 Edsel models, while others dropped the name from their dealership's advertising "slugs." Ford issued a statement that it would distribute coupons to consumers who purchased 1960 models (and carryover 1959 models) prior to the announcement, valued at \$300 to \$400 towards the purchase of new Ford products to offset the decreased values. The company also issued credits to dealers for stock unsold or received, following the announcement.

## **Edsel and its failures**

There is no single reason why the Edsel failed, and failed so spectacularly. Popular culture often faults the car's styling. [Consumer Reports](#) cited poor workmanship. Marketing experts hold the Edsel up as a supreme example of corporate America's failure to understand the nature of the American consumer. Business analysts cite the weak

internal support for the product inside Ford's executive offices. According to author and Edsel scholar [Jan Deutsch](#), the Edsel was "the wrong car at the wrong time."

### "The aim was right, but the target moved"

The Edsel is most famous for being a marketing disaster. Indeed, the name Edsel came to be synonymous with commercial failure, and similar ill-fated products have often been colloquially referred to as Edsels. Since it was such a debacle, it provided a case study for marketers on how *not* to market a product. The main reason the Edsel's failure is so famous was that it flopped despite Ford's investment of \$400,000,000 in its development.

The prerelease advertising campaign touted the car as having "...more YOU ideas," and the teaser advertisements in magazines only revealed glimpses of the car through a highly blurred lens or wrapped in paper or under tarps. Edsels were shipped to the dealerships undercover and remained wrapped on the dealer lots.

But the public also had a hard time understanding what the Edsel was, mostly because Ford made the mistake of pricing the Edsel within Mercury's market price segment. Theoretically, the Edsel was conceived to fit into Ford's marketing plans as the brand slotted in between Ford and Mercury. However, when the car arrived in 1958, its least expensive model—the Ranger—was priced within \$73 (US) of the most expensive and best-trimmed Ford sedan and \$63 (US) less than Mercury's base Medalist model. In its midrange pricing, Edsel's Pacer and Corsair models were *more* expensive than their Mercury counterparts. Edsel's top-of-the-line Citation four door hardtop model was the only model priced to correctly compete with Mercury's mid-range Montclair Turnpike Cruiser model, as illustrated in the chart below.

**1958 Ford Motor Company Pricing (FOB) Structure**

FORD	EDSEL	MERCURY	LINCOLN
Custom 300 \$1,977-2,119			
Fairlane \$2,196-3,407			
Fairlane 500 \$2,410-3,138	Ranger \$2,484-\$2,643	Medalist \$2,547-\$2,617	
	Pacer \$2,700-\$2,993	Monterey \$2,652-\$3,081	
	Corsair \$3,311-\$3,390		
	Citation \$3,500-\$3,766	Montclair \$3,236-\$3,597	
		Park Lane \$4,280-\$4,405	
			Premiere \$4,334-\$4,798
			Capri \$4,803-\$4,951
			Continental \$4,802-\$4,927

Not only was the Edsel competing against its own sister divisions, but model for model, consumers didn't understand what the car was supposed to be—a step up or a step below the Mercury.

After its introduction to the public, the Edsel didn't live up to its overblown hype, even though it did have many new features, such as self-adjusting rear brakes and automatic lubrication. While consumer focus groups had said these and other features would make the "E" car attractive to them as car buyers, the cost of the cars outstripped what the public was willing to pay. When many potential buyers saw the base price tag, they simply left the dealership, and others were frightened by the price for a fully loaded, top of the line model.

### **The wrong car at the wrong time**

One of the external forces working against the Edsel that Ford had no control over was the onset of the recession in late 1957.

When the Edsel was in its planning stages in the early and mid-1950s, the American economy was robust and growing. However, in the years that spanned the planning to its introduction, an economic recession hit, and American consumers not only shifted their idea of what an ideal car should be; in prior economic downturns, buyers flocked to the lower price marques like Plymouth, Chevrolet, and Ford. But in 1958, even these cars were perceived by some as unnecessarily large, and while the compact [Rambler](#) saw itself shoot to the third best selling make, none of the Big Three had anything [compact](#) to sell except their European cars built for [Vauxhall](#), [Simca](#), and [Opel](#). The compacts introduced by the Big Three in 1960 were the direct result of the [recession of 1958](#).

Compounding Edsel's problems was that the car had to appeal to buyers of other well established nameplates from the Big Three, such as [Pontiac](#), Oldsmobile, [Dodge](#), [DeSoto](#), and even its internal sister division, Mercury -- itself never a stellar sales success.

Even if the 1958 recession hadn't hit when it did, the Edsel was entering into a shrinking marketplace. While Ernest Breech convinced Ford management that this market segment offered great untapped opportunity in the early 1950s, when the "E" car was in its earliest stages, by 1957, independent manufacturers in the mid-price field were drifting towards insolvency. Hoping to turn around their losses, [Packard](#) acquired [Studebaker](#), yet the venerable Packard was no longer produced after 1958. On the other hand, [American Motors](#) changed its focus to the compact Rambler models, while their pre-merger brands ([Nash](#) and [Hudson](#)) were discontinued after the 1957 model year. Even Chrysler saw sales of its [DeSoto](#) marque drop dramatically from its 1957 high by over 50% in 1958. Following a disastrous 1959 model year, plans were made in Highland Park to discontinue DeSoto during its 1961 model year run.

Thus, the large, expensive Edsel that was planned to be all things to all people suddenly stood for excess, not progress.

## Edsel, a difficult name to place

The name of the car, Edsel, is also often cited as a further reason for its unpopularity. Naming the vehicle after [Edsel Ford](#) was proposed early in its development. However, the Ford family strongly opposed its use, Henry Ford II stating that he didn't want his father's good name spinning around on thousands of hubcaps. Ford also ran internal studies to decide on a name and even dispatched employees to stand outside movie theaters to poll audiences as to what their feelings were on several ideas. They reached no conclusions.

Ford hired the advertising firm Foote, Cone and Belding to come up with a name. However, when the advertising agency issued its report, citing over six thousand possibilities, Breech commented that they had been hired to develop *a* name, not six thousand names. Early favorites for the name brand included Citation, Corsair, Pacer, and Ranger, which were ultimately chosen for the vehicle's series names.

David Wallace, Manager of Marketing Research, and coworker Bob Young unofficially invited poet [Marianne Moore](#) for input and suggestions. Wallace's rationale was, "*who better to understand the nature of words than a poet.*"

Moore, a loyal Ford owner, submitted numerous lists, which included "Silver Sword," "Thundercrest" (and "Thundercrest"), "Resilient Bullet," "Intelligent Whale," "Pastelogram," "Andante con Moto," "Varsity Stroke," and "Mongoose Civique." (One name she suggested, "[Chaparral](#)," later, coincidentally, was used for a racing car.) Against the strong objection from her brother, Moore also submitted the name *TURCOTINGA*, which was a play on the [Cotinga](#) (a South American bird) and the color turquoise. However, she noted in her letter to Wallace that it was simply a suggestion, and that if she wanted to go in direction of nature, she had several volumes of works that she could review. In a letter dated [December 8, 1955](#), Moore wrote the following:

*Mr. Young,  
May I submit UTOPIAN TURTLETOP? Do not trouble to answer unless you like it. Marianne Moore*

All these outside ideas were rejected, although Miss Moore received two dozen roses and a thank you note affectionately addressed to the *Top Turtletop*, which Moore found amusing. In her reply to Young, she regretted that she could not have been more help, and noted that she was looking forward to trying out the vehicle when it was introduced.

While Moore's contributions were meant to stir creative thought and were not officially authorized or contractual in nature, history has greatly exaggerated her relationship to the project.

At the behest of [Ernest Breech](#), who was chairing a meeting in the absence of [Henry Ford II](#), the car was finally called "Edsel" in honor of [Edsel Ford](#), former company president and son of [Henry Ford](#). Marketing surveys later found the name was thought to sound

like the name of a tractor ([Edson](#)) and therefore was unpopular with the public. Moreover, several consumer studies showed that people associated the name "Edsel" with "weasel" and "dead cell" (dead battery), drawing further unattractive comparisons.

## **Too big when small was in**

Perhaps the most important factor in the Edsel's failure, however, was that when the car was introduced, the U.S. was entering a period of [recession](#). Sales for all car manufacturers, even those not introducing new models, were down; consumers entered a period of preferring less expensive, more [fuel-efficient](#) automobiles.

Edsels were fast, but required premium gas and did not have the fuel economy desired during a recession. Mechanics disliked the bigger engine because of its unique design. The cylinder head had no combustion chamber and was perfectly flat, with the head set at an angle and "roof" pistons forming both a squish zone on one side and a combustion chamber on the other, meaning that the combustion took place entirely within the cylinder bore. This design reduced the cost of manufacture and possibly carbon buildup, but appeared strange to mechanics.

There were also reports of mechanical flaws in the models originating in the factory, due to lack of [quality control](#) and confusion of parts with other Ford models. Edsels in their first (1958) model year were made in both Mercury and Ford factories; the longer wheelbase models, Citation and Corsair, were produced alongside the [Mercury](#) products, and the shorter wheelbase models, Pacer and Ranger, were produced alongside the Ford products. There was never a stand-alone Edsel factory devoted solely to Edsel model production; workers making Fords and Mercurys literally had to change parts bins and tools to assemble extra Edsels once their hourly quota of regular Fords and Mercurys was achieved. As such, the desired quality control of the different Edsel models was difficult to attain for the new make of car. Many Edsels left the line unfinished, with the extra parts having been put into the trunks, with assembly instructions for the mechanics at the dealerships.

## **Design controversies**

The Edsel is best remembered for its trademark "[horsecollar](#)" grille, which made it stand out from other cars of the period. A widely circulated wisecrack at the time was that "It looked like an Oldsmobile sucking on a lemon." Men often referred to the horsecollar grille as being akin to a [woman's genitalia](#). In fact, Robin Jones, a Ford designer at the time, later recalled that someone in the design studio - presumably as a cruel joke - actually taped hair to the inside of the grille area on one of the clay models produced during the design process; the end result, according to Jones, "looked like a hormonally-disturbed cow after giving birth."

Jokes aside, the front of the original Edsel turned out nothing like what was originally intended. Roy Brown, the original chief designer on the project, wanted a slender, almost delicate opening in the center; engineers, fearing engine cooling problems, vetoed the

intended design, which led to the "horsecollar." The vertical grille theme, while improved for the 1959 models, was discontinued for the 1960 models, which were almost indistinguishable from Ford models of the same year, although the new front-end design bore no small resemblance to that of the 1959 [Pontiac](#).

Many drivers disliked having the automatic transmission as pushbuttons (above) mounted on the steering wheel hub: this was the traditional location of the horn, and drivers ended up shifting gears instead of honking the horn. While the Edsel was fast, the location of the transmission pushbuttons was not conducive to street racing. There were jokes about stoplight dragsters and the buttons: D for Drag, L for Leap, and R for Race (instead of Drive, Low and Reverse).

There were also complaints about the taillights on 1958-model Edsel station wagons, which were [boomerang](#)-shaped and placed in a reverse fashion; at a distance, they appeared as arrows pointed in the opposite direction of the turn being made. While the left turn signal blinked, its arrow shape pointed right, and vice versa. However, there was little that could be done to give the Ford-based station wagons a unique appearance from the rear; corporate management insisted that no sheetmetal could be changed. Only the taillights and trim could be touched.

## **The role of Robert McNamara**

While the car and Ford's planning of the car are the most often cited reasons for its failure, internal politics within the executive offices at Ford are as much to blame for the failure of the Edsel. Following World War II, Henry Ford II brought on [Robert McNamara](#) as one of the "whiz kids" to help turn Ford around. McNamara's cost cutting and cost containment skills helped Ford emerge from its near collapse after the war. As such, McNamara eventually assumed a great deal of power at Ford. In many ways, McNamara was very much like Henry Ford: both men were committed to Ford above all other things and had little use for Continental, Lincoln, Mercury, and Edsel brand cars made by the company.

McNamara was against the formation of the separate divisions for Continental, Lincoln, Mercury, and Edsel cars, and moved to consolidate [Lincoln](#), [Mercury](#), and Edsel into the M-E-L division. McNamara saw to it that the Continental program was canceled and that the model was merged into the Lincoln range for 1958. He next set his sights on Edsel by maneuvering for elimination of the dual wheelbases and separate body used in 1958; instead, the Edsel would share the Ford platform and use Ford's inner body structure for 1959. In 1960, the Edsel emerged as a Ford with different trim. McNamara also moved to reduce Edsel's advertising budget for 1959, and for 1960, he virtually eliminated it. The final blow came in the fall of 1959, when McNamara convinced Henry Ford II and the management structure that the Edsel was doomed and that it was time to end production before the Edsel bled the company dry. (Note: McNamara also attempted to end the Lincoln nameplate; however, that effort ended with [Elwood Engel](#)'s now classic redesign of 1961.) McNamara left Ford when he was named [Secretary of Defense](#) by President [John F. Kennedy](#).

# The Edsel Comet

The scheduled 1960 Edsel Comet compact car was hastily rebranded the [Comet](#) and assigned to Mercury dealerships. The Comet was an instant success, selling more cars in its first year than all models of Edsel produced during its three-year run. Styling touches seen in the Comets sold to the public that allude to being part of the Edsel family of models included the instrument cluster, rear tailfins (though canted diagonally), and the taillight shape (the lens is visually similar to that used on the 1960 Edsel, and even retained the embossed "E" code). The Comet's keys were even shaped like Edsel keys, with the center bar removed from the "E" to form a "C." For 1962, Ford officially assigned the Comet to the Mercury brand.

## Popular culture

- As the Edsel was a large commercial failure, the name became a popular joke in various media. An acronym "Every Day Something Else Leaks" was invented because of the car's failure. [Television programs](#), [cartoons](#), [video games](#), and [films](#) have all used the Edsel as humor, usually as a quick joke or as a [sight gag](#). One popular misconception was that the Edsel was an engineering failure, or a [lemon](#), although it shared the same general reliability of its sister Mercury and Ford models that were built in the same factories. <sup>[*citation needed*]</sup> The trademark horsecollar grille was also the source of jokes, such as the widely circulated "It looked like an Oldsmobile sucking on a lemon," or men's reference to the horsecollar grille as resembling a woman's genitalia. It was also said to resemble a [toilet bowl](#).
- In the [Ho Chi Minh](#) Museum in [Hanoi](#), a large scale piece of art uses a real Ford Edsel to represent American failure in the war.
- In [Herbie, the Love Bug](#), Jim Douglas' hippie housemate chops up an Edsel and makes it into a sculpture; he says that it was the best place for it.
- The 1950s [doo-wop](#) group [The Edsels](#) was named after the model.
- [Billy Joel](#)'s 1989 hit single [We Didn't Start the Fire](#) features the Edsel in the [verse](#) dealing with events of 1959: "Edsel is a no-go."
- The car has developed a following in American car culture. Fewer than 6,000 Edsels survive and are considered collectors' items. Top condition [Citation](#) convertibles sometimes sell for over \$100,000. <sup>[*1*]</sup> As usual with [classic cars](#), [convertibles](#) are worth most to collectors, with [hardtop](#) models worth considerably less, [station wagons](#) worth less than hardtops, and [sedans](#) worth the least of classic cars. It is possible to get a solid, running, inspected 1959 sedan for about \$3000 to \$3500 (as of January 2004). <sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>

- In the 1970s TV show [Happy Days](#), [Warren "Potsie" Weber](#)'s father bought an Edsel.
- In [Garfield](#) comic of August 10, 1978 [Garfield](#) is shown mentioning "A car named Edsel" in a list of disasters.
- In the 1982 film [Peggy Sue Got Married](#), Peggy Sue ([Kathleen Turner](#)) travels back to her high school years during the late 1950s and is amused to be reminded that her father owned an Edsel.
- In the 1983 movie [Airplane II: The Sequel](#), the air shuttle Mayflower is given a battery jump using a Ford Edsel.
- In the 1984-86 comic "Mage: The Hero Discovered" (see [Mage \(comics\)](#)), the protagonist, Kevin Matchstick, drives an Edsel.
- In the 1987 video game [Maniac Mansion](#), character Weird Ed had a car with modified rocket engines named the "Weird Edsel."
- In the 1960s television series [The Andy Griffith Show](#), bumbling deputy [Barney Fife](#) was depicted as driving an Edsel, presumably as a reflection of his ineptitude and poor taste.
- In the "Ed Good, Rocko Bad" episode of the 1990s [Nicktoon Rocko's Modern Life](#), Rocko is the victim of a political smear campaign that implies he is responsible for the 1958 Edsel, along with the sinking of the Titanic and the fall of the Roman Empire. Rocko responds to it with, "I didn't cause all those things. I wasn't even *alive* in 1958."
- In the 2005 video game [Destroy All Humans!](#), if the player reads the thoughts of a human, they may say, "Boy, the new Edsel, it's a classic in the making. Oh, boy."
- In the popular [Nickelodeon](#) show [Rugrats](#), an episode featuring a flashback to Stu's childhood featured an Edsel owned by one of Grandpa's friends, which repeatedly broke down.
- In an episode of [The Munsters](#), the family meets a wizard who runs a car company and curses the car parts of rival companies. When asked if he ever cursed an entire car, he responds "Only once. I suppose you heard of the Edsel?"
- In the [calendar](#) published by [Mad Magazine](#) for [1965](#), an entry for one day reads: *The [Soviet Union](#) claims to have invented the Edsel, 1961.* This was followed by the next day's entry: *The [United States](#) gladly acknowledges the Soviet Union's claim to invention of the Edsel, 1961.*

- The magazine also published an article titled "Success Story," with art by [Don Martin](#), about a garage [mechanic](#) named "Arthur A. Freen" who became an "automotive genius." His masterpiece: The Edsel.
- In the 5th-season [Star Trek: Voyager](#) episode "[Timeless](#)", the crew celebrate the creation of the "Quantum Slipstream Drive"; a new propulsion system that promises significantly faster travel. However, during the celebrations, [Tom Paris](#) is seen conducting computer simulations. Following a question from [Harry Kim](#), he comments that the technology is fundamentally flawed, by remarking: "Harry, I think we built an Edsel".

## Highly collectible

Fifty years after its spectacular failure, Edsel has become a highly collectible item amongst vintage car hobbyists. A mint 1958 car can sell up to \$100,000, while rare models, like 1960 convertible, may price up to \$200,000. While the design was considered "ugly" fifty years ago, many other car manufacturers, such as [Pontiac](#) and [Alfa Romeo](#), have employed similar vertical grille successfully on their car designs.

Many of the Edsel's features, such as transmission lock on ignition, adjustable brakes, gear selection as steering wheel buttons etc, which were considered "too impractical" in the late 1950s, are today standard features of sports cars.

## Trivia

In May 1958, then Vice President Richard M. Nixon was on a trip to Peru, riding in an Edsel convertible, when he was pelted with eggs and tomatoes by demonstrators. Nixon later joked: "They were throwing eggs at the car, not me."<sup>[1]</sup>

## References

1. <sup>^</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/01/nyregion/01edsel.html?ei=5088&en=0da3566504b68860&ex=1343620800&adxnnl=1&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss&adxnnlx=1186254141-pw3NTgdDfIDE5kaCjk9rTQ>
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## External links

### [Edsel vehicles \(category\)](#)

- [Edsel.com](#) History, specifications, resources for owners.
- [Smith Motor Company](#) Virtual Edsel Dealer
- [The International Edsel Club](#)
- [Famous Ford Flops](#) The Edsel and other Ford models.
- ["Auto Biography"](#) Failure Magazine examines the history of the Edsel (March, 2002)
- [Edsels in the Media](#) Listing of Edsel references in popular culture.
- [Edsel Promo Time](#) A Web site devoted to plastic dealer promotional models of Edsels.
- [Washington Post article about the Edsel](#)