

From here to infiniti

Nissan's reincarnated Infiniti range is heading in a new direction, ready to do battle with the established luxury giants.

WORDS JOHN CAREY WHEELS MAGAZINE



Nissan G Coupe

ALMOST INFINITE PATIENCE is required to establish and nurture a premium car brand's credibility, so Infiniti is an apt name for a relative newcomer. The upmarket division of Nissan knows it won't be easy putting down roots in Australia, but they have two factors working in their favour; a realistically modest establishment plan, and a range of cars that is about to expand in interesting directions.

For car makers, premium positioning equals profit. When the customer is prepared to pay more, much of the extra goes straight onto the bottom line. The challenge is to convince potential buyers your brand has that X-factor – outstanding design, advanced tech, great driving qualities, impeccable quality, superb service – to make the price seem reasonable.

Infiniti has learned some tough lessons since its creation more than two decades ago. Nissan first revealed Infiniti in 1989 (the same year that Toyota launched Lexus) and likewise intended it as a competitor for established names such as Mercedes-Benz, Audi and BMW. In 1993 the brand's first model, the Q45, arrived in Australia. But the big luxury sedan had been styled for America, the brand's major market, and after a paltry 132 had been sold, the Infiniti was quietly withdrawn in 1998.

Infiniti survived in the USA, but now, aware that the rest of the world, especially Asia, is where an increasing percentage of premium car buyers are found, the brand is abandoning its US-centric policy. Although more than half the 170,000 Infinitis sold each year are bought by Americans, brand boss Toru Saito believes it's time to take it global. That means designing and developing new cars. "If we do things right, we have potential to grow," he says, adding that Infiniti must "try to avoid making a 'me-too' product".

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Could Infiniti's plug-in hybrid supercar, the Emerg-E, go into production? The mid-engined two-seater was one of the most attractive concepts at the Geneva Salon d'Automobile this year. Infiniti design chief Shiro Nakamura says the brand needs a "halo car" to top its range. Two fully functional prototypes, "90 per cent the same" as the delicate show car, will be built to further develop its untested high-performance drivetrain.

Already, Infiniti is producing some of the most attractive concept cars seen on the international show circuit. And, from next year, the company will begin rolling out its new-direction models. First, in 2013, will be a replacement for its G sedan, a direct competitor for cars such as the Audi A4, BMW 3 Series and the Mercedes C-Class. Late 2013 or early 2014, Infiniti will launch an all-new, medium-size, battery electric sedan. Then, in 2014, will come a compact luxury hatchback, its style previewed by the Etherea concept car shown at Geneva early last year.

Infiniti's August 2012 (re)launch line-up for Australia isn't as exciting as these cars. It consists of the ageing G Coupe and Cabriolet, the vanilla-plain M sedan and the brutish looking FX, a big five-seat SUV with V6 and V8 engines that's sure to be the most popular Infiniti at first. While this trio may not have the right stuff to scramble to the top of the premium category sales charts, they will allow Infiniti to fine-tune the high-grade customer service experience its first three compact, Japanese-style showrooms – in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane – are expected to deliver. When the truly exciting Infinitis begin to arrive from the second half of next year, the sales team will be well prepared. 🌐