



Constructing the (Tribute) Fossmobile

10 MINUTE READ, BY RONALD M. FOSS

Background/Context

The Fossmobile was the first successful gas-powered automobile in Canada. It was designed and manufactured in 1897 by my grandfather, George Foote Foss. He owned his own shop in Sherbrooke, Quebec, offering bicycle repair, machining, and blacksmithing. George became interested in automobiles after a disheartening ride in an electric brougham while visiting Boston, Massachusetts. The batteries of the vehicle lost the required power well before the suggested duration time, motivating George to find a better solution. During the winter of 1896, he tinkered with his own four-horsepower, single-cylinder, gasoline combustion engine automobile, which was completed in the spring of 1897. It has been recognized as the first of its kind to be successfully built in Canada. However, it was never seen again, after being sold in 1902, despite many family attempts to locate it.

This piece of family history inspired me to establish the goal of creating a tribute (replica), as close as possible, of the Foss invention. The plan was to use reverse engineering to reproduce the inventor's legacy. There were no blueprints or drawings, so plans for the tribute automobile were based solely on the detailed scrutiny of 125-year-old family photos depicting the original Fossmobile.

The remaining Foss family archives were also reopened and studied, to assist with telling the story and to further document the historical details more accurately. Fossmobile Enterprises was founded as a means to build networks, foster collaboration, and share Canadian historical automobile facts.

Important connections were made with automotive historians and guidance was sought from highly regarded experts in vintage automobile restoration. While providing oversight for this initiative, elements of project management and the fundamentals of leadership effectiveness were utilised.

The tribute Fossmobile, on appraisal, was thought to be about ninety percent true to the original. It was ultimately donated by the Foss family in 2022 and is now part of the Canadian collection at the Canadian Automotive Museum in Oshawa, Ontario. For the entire year of 2024, the tribute Fossmobile will be on a Canada-wide tour called “Exit the Horse,” sponsored by Heritage Canada.

The Necessary Steps for Success

Research of North American Interest (the Market)

Before considering the pursuit of an initiative such as this, it was important to establish whether there would be an interest in the subject matter. Significant due diligence was conducted with vintage automobile club leadership, automotive historians, museum curators, and journalists across North America as a means to ascertain the level of interest, which was quickly confirmed across these sectors.

The next important step for this project was to establish an agreement for the long-term display of the completed tribute Fossmobile. I was not taking on this project to have a garage trophy, but was doing this so that all Canadians could come to appreciate the finished tribute. This involved speaking with multiple museums, the City of Sherbrooke, where George Foss had started it all, and even a few private collectors. It was the museums that were the most responsive and, in all cases, they sent me a checklist of required completion criteria in order for the tribute to be accepted into their collections. The most extensive of these checklists helped to establish important project benchmarks, which were later exceeded.

Next, it was necessary to seek out a number of skilled craftsmen who could assist with various aspects of the build. As part of that research, it was necessary to assess their enthusiasm in becoming a member of the team while still embracing the family’s vision. These were very important steps in determining the viability of pursuing the goal and formed the basis for creating an effective business plan and a workable budget.

Establishing a Business Plan

With the important information gathered, a business plan was then drafted. Formulating a business plan was essential for laying out the framework to guide the business priorities and goals. First, an

informal steering committee was established, like a board of directors, made up of family members and vintage automobile experts. These were people I could turn to for advice and direction.

Next, the performance indicators, or milestones, were set into the plan, which included an in-depth project critical path, complete with the sequencing of activities or tasks by project category, interdependencies across the project, dates, accountabilities, and a completion checklist. Once this was accomplished, the next step was to create the framework needed for creating a financial budget. I started with the broad categories, like chassis, engine, body, etc., right down to the specific parts and tasks within each category. A step that was not overlooked during this process was the possibility of unforeseen expenses, and in this case, there were a few surprises. So, adding in some contingency planning to the budget was definitely beneficial.

Once these two stages were complete, we had sufficient information to make a “go” or “no-go” decision. In this initial phase, I was personally the one putting up the capital required for the project, therefore much of the financial burden was on me.

Registering a Business

After drafting the plan and setting the budget, it was evident that it was a “go” decision. The business “Fossmobile Enterprises” was registered to make it a legal, operational entity. Registering a business can be as simple as registering your company’s name as a sole proprietorship, which was the case here. However, other structures, such as partnerships and limited companies, were considered. Based on the lack of complexity for this type of registration, it was not necessary to supply documents, like proof of insurance, permits, and licenses, or even organizational structure and governance, to any level of government, regulatory body, or association; therefore, substantial red-tape time was saved.

It was necessary, however, to obtain trademark protection for the term “Fossmobile,” which provided the family with exclusive rights to the use of or reference to the name. This required meeting with a lawyer to file the appropriate documents. Once approved, we were officially able to use the name and trademark symbol Fossmobile™ while having legal protection should it be used by any third party.

The last business step was to secure a web domain name and create a website to share information about and draw attention to the project. The first stage of the website shared the history of the Fossmobile and the steps underway to build the tribute. Gradually, we added the ability to monitor the progression of the project with updates, articles of interest, and a detailed digital photo gallery. The last phase of the website build was to add in the capabilities and services that could be obtained through Fossmobile Enterprises as an ongoing business entity.

Securing Period Parts & Agreements

One of the objectives of the project was to achieve authenticity, to the highest degree possible, given that the original Fossmobile was not available to us. The hope was to acquire vintage parts from the era, with a plan to build this automobile, having parts replicated only when it was absolutely necessary. Research began for parts from the period, and I was fortunate enough to come across a no-name three-and-three-quarter-horsepower, single-cylinder, gasoline combustion engine, a period-correct chassis, and a period-correct wood body. Some of these were donated to the project, generating a positive impact on the budget.

We were also given the opportunity to visit a museum just outside of Boston, where there was a 1901 Crestmobile, thought to be the successor to the Fossmobile and very similar in many ways. The curators were very generous with their time and support, allowing us to measure and photograph every detail. This allowed us to scrutinize the details and align the specifics with what we saw in the original Fossmobile photos. These steps not only helped with authenticity, but also saved us unnecessary costs, as finding old parts, restoring or modifying them, and creating them based on these detailed photographs was more cost-effective than investing in the fabrication from an outright new design.

Fossmobile Enterprises then entered into multiple formal agreements. The first was with a very reputable vintage automobile restoration company, which would focus on the mechanical aspects of the project. Additionally, we had specialty work completed by a variety of very skilled Canadian craftsmen. The late 1890s wood body restoration, including custom fabrication of the seat and front cowlings, was completed by a local wood craftsman, using time-honoured methods. To complement the old buggy look, seat cushions were hand-made by a local upholsterer, who completed the job as if it had been done in the late 1890s. The task of refurbishing the wheels and spokes and acquiring period-correct tires was completed by vintage wheel experts. The need for

all-new custom elliptical leaf-spring suspension was awarded to a specialty leaf-spring shop on the other side of the country.

The collaboration involved with these choices was a significant undertaking, as the individual craftsmen had to, from time to time, work together to confirm measurements, attempt fittings, and take on final installation steps. To save time and keep costs in line, it was essential that all parties saw this as one inclusive project, with everyone participating as an important team member. They needed to respect other member's unique skill sets and communicate effectively with one another, while never losing sight of the family's end goal. As the project manager, I was the central link for establishing and sustaining these relationships, by navigating their personal differences, as well as their business and political agendas. When necessary, I used leadership by influence and moral suasion techniques with other key influencers and decision-makers in order to keep the project on track. In the end, this was an incredible experience, with long-term business relationships established across the group.

Securing Funding

I had set aside some capital for this business venture, which gave me a head start. At the outset I had not considered small capitalization loans or finding possible investors. However, as costs mounted, I decided it was plausible to raise cash. With my previous experience in the not-for-profit sector, I began to explore the concept of donors. I was quickly able to secure pledges, first from family and friends, and then from the general public, with a GoFundMe campaign. That effort inspired me to seek out corporate sponsors and, sure enough, success happened there too. It was painstaking work, as the submission format for corporate sponsorship is often complex, and the rejection rate was about nine out of every ten formal requests submitted. However, by narrowing my effort to the automotive sector, that success rate improved, to about one in five submissions. With every new corporate sponsor, project credibility and momentum followed.

I was now able to shore up the operational and contingency funds necessary to complete the project, but I was not done. I felt that all three levels of government should also come alongside the project. The first to show interest was the City of Sherbrooke, and then the Province of Quebec, as this was a project with a shared heritage perspective. The most challenging to convince was the federal government, or by extension, Heritage Canada. I spent more than a year haggling with them to acknowledge the Fossmobile history and partially fund the build part of the project. It took

significant tenacity, as I was turned down four times, always being told that they don't fund replicas. I would simply move the dialogue to the next most senior person, with the constant reminder that they generously funded the replica of the Canadian *Bluenose*. In the end, I finally received some financial support, which the project and story deserved.

I can proudly say that securing funds from these three very unique donor groups, each requiring more effort than I had anticipated, meant that the tribute Fossmobile project was close to a break-even success. The costs were based on only the out-of-pocket expenditures, not any of my time or leadership expertise. It demonstrated that with ingenuity, perseverance, and determination, it is possible to secure the necessary funding for a project like this.

Public Relations & the Media

We chose Wikipedia as a place to start to solidify the family story, facts, and historical details. Wikipedia pages for the Fossmobile and George Foote Foss were formed. In addition to the Fossmobile Enterprises website, there was an easily accessible place in the public domain that I, or others, could refer people to, so that they could view the historical information.

The next step in crafting a successful public relations campaign was to define a set of clear objectives that aligned with the family's overall vision. For the most part, this was about making our family story more accessible to the public. I started with creating compelling messages that would resonate with the target audience, including vintage automobile enthusiasts and historians. However, the goal was to eventually reach the general public with this important piece of Canadian automotive history.

This messaging began with writing my own articles. I sought out the best places for getting them accepted and published. In conjunction with this, I fostered strong media relationships, which in a short amount of time resulted in having them do the writing or covering of the story for me. The good news was that they felt the family had a compelling and engaging story to tell. By using a storytelling approach, we were able to send a viable message to the target audiences, one that seems to have left a lasting impression.

Ideally, we wanted to utilize a variety of channels, including traditional media, digital media, and social media platforms. We had great success with print, broadcast, and social media, but we could have done much more with other aspects of digital media, such as blogging and podcasts.

Conclusion

There is no question in my mind that having the Fossmobile as a part of our family heritage was a huge driving influence behind the perseverance that led to the success of the building of the tribute Fossmobile. Once the project began, most of the reputational risk was on the back of the family name. This key driver may not be there to motivate all project developments, but it was instrumental for the tribute Fossmobile project.

Establishing any goal, taking on any project, and starting any company, simple or complex, can be challenging. As with the tribute Fossmobile project, solid business planning, effective use of resources, strategic relationship building, and targeted capital acquisition should lead to some positive results. Add in enthusiasm and tenacity along with a balance of humility and pride, and greater success has the potential to become a wonderful reality. I want to thank all those who were involved, in whatever capacity, as it is Canadians who are the ultimate beneficiaries of all we undertook to achieve.

About the Author



Ronald M. Foss (Ron) is an experienced leader with a demonstrated history of working in the management consulting field. Skilled in sales management, human resource development, emotional intelligence management, performance management, and leadership effectiveness.

Ron is a versatile professional with a Master of Management focused on Business Administration and Leadership from McGill University. His career spans thirty years in the financial services industry, ten years in private practice conducting one-on-one executive coaching, and five years running Fossmobile Enterprises. He is a sought-after keynote speaker on many of the topics above, but more recently on the success of the tribute Fossmobile. He is currently the Executive Director of Fossmobile Enterprises in Burlington, Ontario. [www.fossmobile.ca]

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