

How the 911 got its name

The initial units of the 911 bore the type designation 901 until another automotive manufacturer asserted ownership of the middle zero. Porsche responded quickly – and the 911 was born.

When it came to naming its new model, Porsche initially based its approach on the Volkswagen number ranges for spare parts. In light of the potential for future collaborations with the VW plant, the new Porsche was intended to be compatible with the numbering system used there. As the figures in the 900s had not yet been assigned in Wolfsburg, the team in Zuffenhausen earmarked the project designation 901 for the six-cylinder variant and 902 for a subsequent four-cylinder model. On 12 September 1963, the prototype of the Porsche 901 duly celebrated its world premiere at the International Motor Show (IAA) in Frankfurt. The car was still some way off being ready for series production, however, and the planned market launch in October 1964 gave the Porsche engineers a whole year to upgrade the 901 from a prototype to a production model.

In September 1964, the Porsche 901 subsequently made a high-profile appearance at the Paris Motor Show that caused the company to run into unexpected trouble. The Porsche management team were stunned when French carmaker Peugeot issued an objection in early October 1964, stating that the 901 type designation represented a breach of French copyright and trademark protection law. This development initially caused considerable confusion, as the Porsche development department had already conducted accurate research in relation to a potential type 901 model designation. Having established that only a German lorry manufacturer had used the designation 901, they had concluded that this would not pose any problem. However, Peugeot complained that its practice of using three-digit series of numbers with a zero in the middle – which it had followed since 1929 – entitled it to legal protection in France with respect to any similar series of numbers.

This left Porsche with no choice but to rename the 901 model while it was in the process of being launched. After considering various options, such as the addition of 'GT' at the end of the name, Ferry Porsche decided to rename the car as the 'type 911' on 22 November 1964. The reasons behind this were entirely pragmatic: as the brochures, price lists, operating manuals and the type designation on the tail and the glove compartment lid were already in the final phase of preparation, that meant the easiest solution was simply to use a second '1'. This had of course been part of the designation all along and was fully developed, whereas there was no time left for producing a new number type – let alone an entirely new name. Back in 1964, no one could have known that this makeshift solution would ultimately rise to prominence as the world-famous 911. Nevertheless, the fact that '911' is also the emergency number in the USA helped the company generate additional publicity for its newly renamed model.