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## Project

### Better Place

**This award-winning concept for electric vehicles is relatively immune to the automotive industry's current agita because it is not a car company. It's an infrastructure company.**

By Jonathan Schultz



Better Place's network of charge spots is designed for easy recharging of EV batteries

At last week's Frankfurt Motor Show, [Rolls-Royce unveiled a 5,500-pound sedan](#), Porsche fielded a [collector's-edition 911 sports car](#) and a cabal of Russian millionaires debuted an unattainable 215 MPH exotic called the [Marussia B2](#). Substitute a brand name or nationality here and there, and Frankfurt would mirror almost every automotive show of the past decade — if not for the upending forces of a global recession and an aggressive, well-capitalized electric-vehicle venture camped on

the convention floor.

That firm, Better Place, is less than two years old, yet its CEO, Shai Agassi, put both the assembled Frankfurters and the internal-combustion engine on notice: It had ordered 100,000 purely electric vehicles, which would be deployed on the world's roads in the next six years.

Better Place is relatively immune to the automotive industry's current agita because it is not a car company. Rather, it is an infrastructure company, partnering with sovereign nations, utilities and manufacturers to lay both the physical and commercial groundwork for widespread electric-vehicle, or EV, adoption. This holistic approach earned the firm a 2009 [INDEX Award](#) in the Community category. As Sven Thesen, head of utility operations and sustainability strategy, sees it, Better Place's job is to imbue the EV experience with a "component of silence: a feeling that there's nothing exceptional about it. You go home, plug in your car, get up in the morning, car's fully charged, life is good, off you go." (Click [here](#) for a video demonstrating what a day in electric-vehicle utopia might look like.)

To create that vision, Better Place needs powerful connections; there's no going it alone at this scale of infrastructure design. Its first partner, Israel, has entrusted Better Place to negotiate with utilities to run juice to charging points set strategically around urban areas, and to construct battery-swap stations where an automated process removes a depleted battery and replaces it with a topped-off one — not unlike visiting a gas station. For its part, Israel provides attractive tax and rebate incentives to ensure that citizens adopt the model. Denmark, which generates 20 percent of its electricity from wind turbines, sees EVs as a means of storing and using that clean power. The Danes' share of those pledged 100,000 EVs will run on domestically produced clean energy, deployed on Better Place infrastructure, over the next two years.

Of course, EVs aren't crowding dealership lots. Through an exclusive partnership with Renault-Nissan, however, Better Place has secured a supply of vehicles that is compatible with its charging and battery-swap software and hardware. At Frankfurt, Renault unveiled the [Fluence ZE Concept](#), whose onboard computer interface and battery bay were envisioned explicitly around Better Place's network.

If this union smacks faintly of mobile-phone manufacturer/carrier partnerships, it's no coincidence. Better Place is ultimately a network whose revenue is determined not by hardware sales but by the car-driving public's use of its infrastructure. It can adopt a Boost Mobile pay-as-you-go model or a T-Mobile monthly or yearly contract, whatever makes sense in the client relationship. Meanwhile, Renault-Nissan's autos will find purchasers, but their owners — DOTs, Zipcar-like rental agencies, dealerships, even Better Place itself — won't necessarily be the cars' end users. Better Place's spin

on a toppling industry isn't so much audacious as it is savvy. Says Sven Thesen, "We haven't innovated much new technology; we've just added some smarts."

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