HOW JAY LENO AND MARIO ANDRETTI HELPED SHELL LAUNCH ITS NEW GASOLINE BRAND

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Shell rolled out its new V-Power NiTRO+ gasoline with a cross-country rally, one-of-a-kind test car, racing legend Mario Andretti, and Jay Leno.

Jay Leno interviews racing legend Mario Andretti with the winning Shell Eco-marathon Americas 2015 team, students from University of Toronto who designed the product.

How do you jazz up an announcement as unglamorous as improved gasoline?

For Shell, it meant devising a unique road-legal dual-fuel test car, staging a star-studded cross-country rally with racing legend Mario Andretti that culminated at Jay Leno's cavernous Burbank garage, and a tour of his car collection, followed by presentations covering Shell STEM initiatives and what makes the new gas special.

Shell V-Power NiTRO+ is the company's most advanced premium gas. Introduced this month in the US, after rolling out in Canada, the U.K., and Argentina, it replaces the Shell's old V-Power premium at pumps and has the same octane rating (which varies by market). The difference is NiTRO+ apparently contains additives that offer superior protection against engine wear, gunk (a sticky, greasy residue from carbon deposit build-up), and corrosion, even purging gunk from engines that previously used lower-quality gasolines.


(L-R) Jay Leno, with Hennessey Performance's John Hennessey, racer Mario Andretti (front), and Shell's Elen Phillips

"More people are buying cars that require premium gas, but most think that premium products are all the same," says Elen Phillips, VP, Shell Americas Fuels Sales and Marketing. "The product we had before Shell V-Power Nitro-enriched was great on performance and gunk. But we wanted to keep pushing the product.

"This gives best total protection against gunk and corrosion and, for the first time, engine wear, so now the engine can run the way it was designed to run," she adds. "Our message is: not all fuels are the same, so we wanted the do something different for the campaign. Part of that was getting [well-known] experts and enthusiasts who really know cars to support what we saying. The dual engine is the ultimate way of showing the what it actually does."

Side-by-side Gunk Comparisons. Top Row: Intake valves before and after running Shell's V-Power NiTRO+; Bottom Row: Intake valves before and after running on a competitor's premium gasoline. *Images courtesy of Shell*

THE CAMPAIGN

For the relay, Shell specially designed and built a car that concurrently runs two types of gas—in this case regular gas against V-Power NiTRO+—enabling a comparative study of engine performance and gunk build-up under the same driving conditions.

The relay began with a June 2 send-off in New York's Times Square, with promotional stops across the U.S. that lined up celebrity car enthusiasts like TV host Carson Daly, Chicago Bears' Matt Forte and boxing legend Sugar Ray Leonard, and racing stars Marc Gene, Helio Castroneves, Bobby Rahal, and Mario Andretti. On June 9, Andretti drove the final leg of the rally from Las Vegas into Jay Leno's Garage.


Jay Leno hosts a tour of his garage.

There, Shell treated VIPS and press to a Leno-hosted tour of his massive car and motorcycle collection, engine results demonstration by Shell engineers, virtual reality and mobile games outlining the fuel's technological advancements, and meet-and-greet with the winning team of the Shell Eco-marathon Americas 2015, a competition where engineering students design, build, and race super-energy efficient vehicles. The brand campaign also includes a co-promotion with BMW, which recommends the new gas for its M Series. Folks who buy the fuel during the campaign's first 100 days are entered to win one.

"It's hard to do ads for things you don't believe in, but this is a hobby of mine," Leno tells *Fast Company*. "I can see why one product is better than another, and that's why I agreed to do it. It's the difference between orange juice and orange juice from concentrate. Gas is so terrible in California, when you get a product that's better, it really does make a difference."

Jay Leno introduces the winning Shell Eco-marathon Americas 2015 team, students from University of Toronto who designed, built, and raced a gasoline-powered prototype car that gets 3400 mpg. Shell sponsors efforts like these to encourage STEM careers and expand its corporate brand. "We're not just a gas company," says Shell's Ellen Phillips. "We're an energy company."

"Here, we're mandated to ethanol [which can exacerbate engine corrosion] and there are so many gas stations you've never heard of," he adds. "Unfortunately people think all fuels are the same. They'll a pay a huge amount of money for a BMW or Mercedes, but then put the cheapest, crappiest fuel in it and wonder why it isn't running the way it should. When you go running, you don't do it in flip flops, you get running shoes. And if you have a high-performance car you want to put a high-performance gasoline in it."

Leno got involved with Shell last year when it called him to help endorse the eco-marathon program. "The eco-marathon is something I would have promoted even if I wasn't involved in it—anything that gets young people interested in engineering and science," he says. "Even if you want to be green, you still need scientists. In the real world, we use fuels, you need lubricants, so the greener and more efficient you can make them is doing a part, too."

(L-R) Shell engineers Jim Macias and Adrian Jeurgens by the dual-fuel car.

THE SCIENCE

The Nitro+ formulation—three years in the making—combines two anti-corrosion, gunk-blasting cleaning agents that perform better than the single component in the previous V-Power formula. This innovation enabled inclusion of a new component that reduces engine wear by forming a protective barrier on the metal surface.

"People usually think of motor oil as the anti-wear, but there are parts of the engine, like the piston assembly, where it's very difficult for the lubricant to consistently form a film on the metal surface," says Jim Macias, Shell technology manager for retail fuels, North America. "One end of the molecule binds to the metal surface of the engine, while the other end solubilizes it in the gasoline. The formulation is completely new; it hadn't existed before."

The next innovation was designing a more accurate test car to show side-by-side comparisons of different gasolines. That's where Adrian Jeurgens, Shell's North American gasoline fuels technology field scientist, comes in.

Shell Dual Fuel Car with internal views of the engines using regular (left) and V-Power Nitro+ (right).

He oversaw the team that designed the dual-fuel car that could drive on separate gasolines simultaneously, with a single fuel driving three pistons in a closed system on each side. It's a third generation model evolved from a design in the early '90s and made street-legal through features like a fire-suppressant system and impact protection around trunk-end fuel tanks.

"It's an innovative way to test our fuels in a single car driven under the same conditions," he says.

[Photos: Susan Karlin for Fast Company]

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