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THE DRIVE-IN FORCE

Maybe it takes a 23-year-old to rescue a 74-year-old drive-in. **BY COLIN S. SARGENT**

The Saco Drive-In, the second-oldest operational drive-in in the country, gained national attention this summer as one of the winners of Honda's Project Drive-In contest. The win secured Saco an \$80,000 new digital projector, necessary to play the majority of movies coming out of Hollywood, as celluloid film slips out of use. Many distributors announced plans to discontinue film as an option beginning in 2014. This conundrum means that many of America's 360-odd surviving drive-ins—including five in Maine—could be doomed to close in the next couple years.

Enter Honda's PR division, who launched Project Drive-In in a clever attempt to earn free advertising. About 140 drive-ins entered Honda's online contest to promote their cause to modernize and survive. Their success attracting fans to the auto maker's

contest website determined the winners.

The contest has paid off in a big way for Honda. It became so popular that the planned five winners has now risen to nine, and the contest has been extended.

It was salvation for Ry Russell, 23, and his crew at Saco Drive-In. "You could say we were running for this contest before it even started. We'd built up a social media base in the hopes that there would be some sort of opportunity. We've tried to do special events to try to lure people to the drive-in, and show them why the drive-in deserves to come back. We were able to gain the support to win this contest with a mix of traditional low-cost marketing, like sponsoring par-

ties for WPOR that we had 200 cars come to, and with social media. With the Project Drive-In campaign, we made sure to ask our friends and the fans of our drive-in to help us out. We added give-aways in order to reward those who were volunteering to help us."

We'd built up a social media base ... what Honda has done is incredible.

Russell also believes the drive-in is as relevant as ever. "With the way the economy still is, we're looking [for reasonable ways] to take the whole family out. With [tickets and food from the] concessions, the movies are 80 bucks for a family of four. With us, people can enjoy a night out, for a whole family, for 20 to 25 dollars. We want to make sure nobody gets priced out of a fun night."

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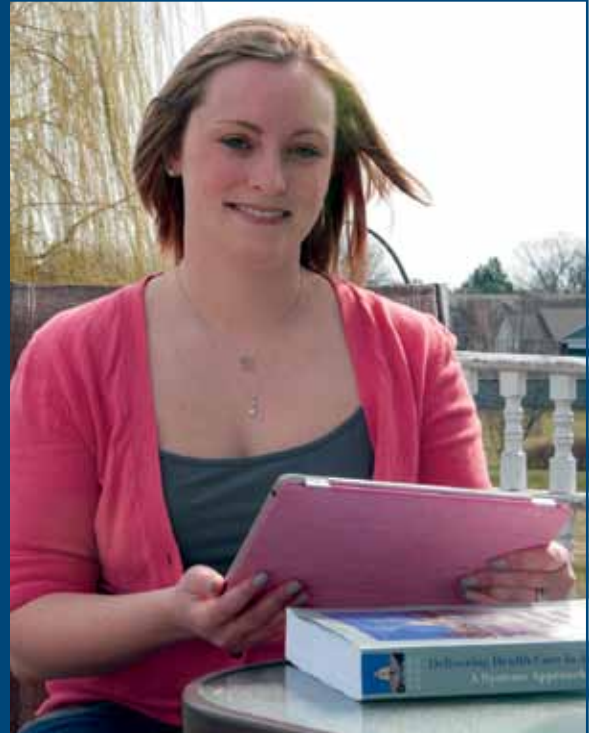
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#DRIVE-IN FORCE (continued from page 39)

Russell chuckles. “We were happy to do a lot of free marketing for Honda, and that’s the point of the contest—whichever drive-in gets the most votes gets saved, but every voter has been introduced to Honda’s message. What they were doing was a different application of what I’d done giving out T-shirts and movie passes. They spend X amount of dollars, and get their users to push the message of Honda’s corporate responsibility. It allowed them to get in front of so many people in a not in-your-face fashion.

“A couple of the other drive-ins say that we were favored from the start, that it was rigged, that Honda sponsored us. But that’s just because we got out in front of the contest. We’d been begging car dealerships all around the state to buy us a projector. We’d have given them free advertising forever. Imagine, a dealer ad, before every movie played at Saco Drive-



In. We couldn’t get anyone to cover the full cost of the new projector...but it means we’d already mobilized plans to get support, to demonstrate to the dealers that we’d be worth it, so we had a real leg up because of the work we’d done over the last three years. Our whole team really bonded, and every-

one came up with creative ideas, even painting up their cars with ‘Save Saco Drive-In.’”

Russell, who works as a loan officer at Primary Residential Mortgage in Scarborough, grew up in Saco, so the drive-in is part of his childhood. He bought the business when he was still in college. He credits the success of the project to his fortunate readiness and to the skills he learned while working and in the business program at USM. “I think USM is the best deal around. There’s a handful of teachers I had the pleasure to learn from there, and to this day I still

have a good relationship with—I learned truly necessary skills [from]—Fred Aiello, Jeanne Munger, and Johnny Chen. In fact, I still call them with questions. They were the ones who went out of their way and after hours to help me. I tell anyone I know who’s going into that program to take one class from each of those professors and they’ll be ready for the real world. And while I didn’t get a degree, I didn’t ever want to send out a resume to some HR manager anyway: I wanted the education. If I’d gone the traditional route, would I be making more money? Sure. But would I be as satisfied? Not even close.”

Honda’s Project-Drive ends on December 7, and until then there’s a chance to save another Maine fixture: Pride’s Corner Drive-In, which serves Westbrook and the surrounding area. Check it out at projectdrivein.com. ■

If the Saco Drive-In, established in 1939, is the second-oldest in the country, what is the oldest? It’s Shankweiler’s Auto Park in Orefield, Pennsylvania, 1934.

CHRISTOPHER PROTZMANN

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