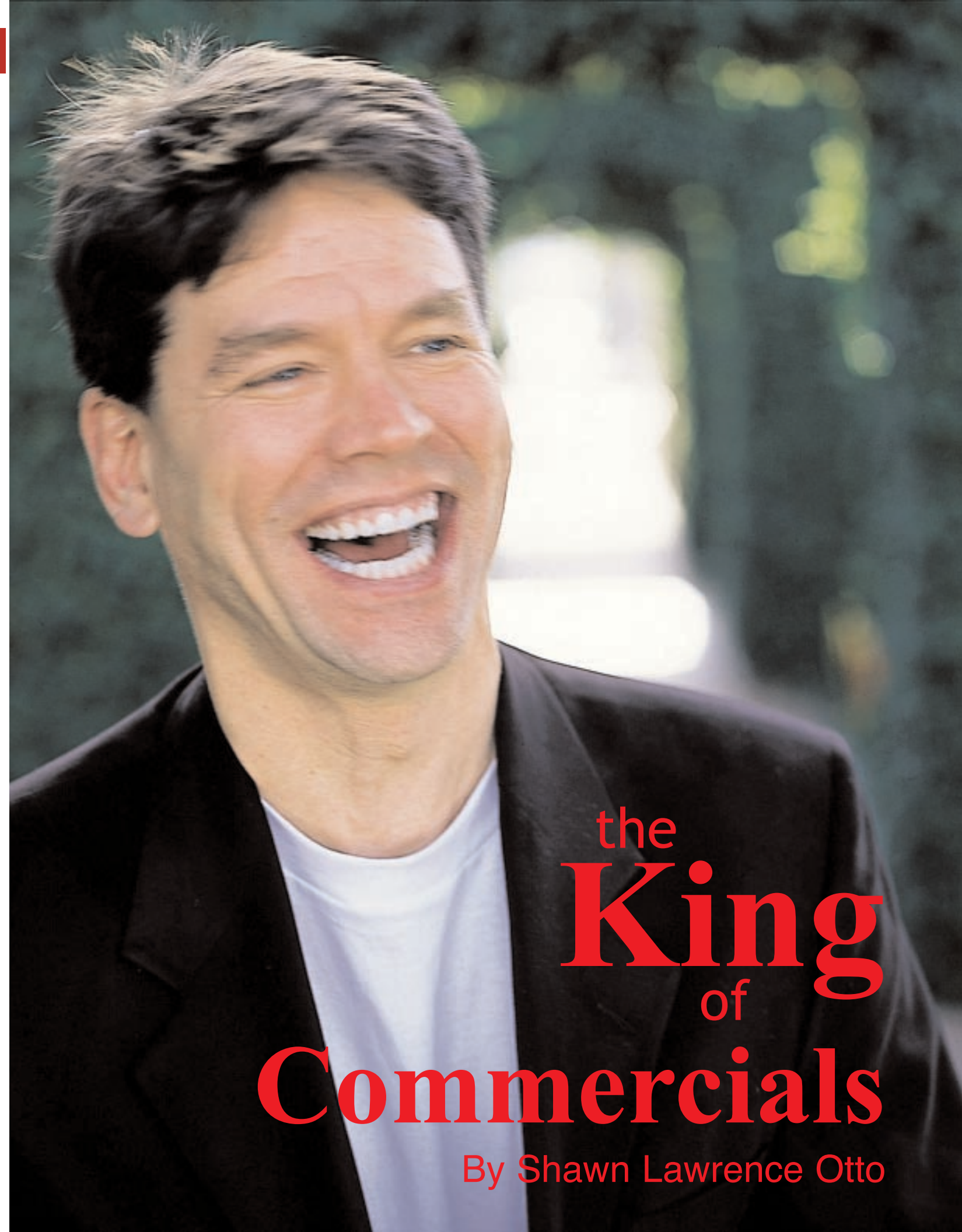




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the  
**King**  
of  
**Commercials**

By Shawn Lawrence Otto

# "You want to make it smart, sexy and fun." - MENTAL ENGINEERING host John Forde

Meet John Forde, the most visible TV ad man in history.

But don't ask what agency he runs - he's likely to bristle at that. Because the King of Commercials doesn't design ads. Never has. He reverse engineers them.

Forde's award-winning public television series, **MENTAL ENGINEERING**, is a nationally distributed show on PBS affiliates in 250 major American markets, with an estimated 10 million loyal viewers, whose whole point is to turn the normal ad process inside out.

"We're like Ebert and Roeper of TV ads," says Forde, "We're TV ad critics. Everybody's got a favorite ad, something they think of as the funniest, or the smartest, or the most tasteless ad they've ever seen. What we

do on the show is we take those ads and we break them down, figure out why they work, how they work, and we have a hell of a lot of fun doing it."

## HEAVY HITTERS

It's a novel concept that has created a new genre. "I think it comes down to the panelists," says Forde. "We're able draw on some of the funniest, most brilliant minds in America, like advertising executive Bill Hillsman, who was behind the nationally famous campaign ads for Jesse Ventura and Paul Wellstone. Lizz Winstead, creator of THE DAILY SHOW, and actor Aisha Tyler of FRIENDS.

**"MENTAL ENGINEERING is the most interesting weekly half hour of social commentary on television."**

**-Bill Moyers**

The format is simple, which belies the complexity of what's really going on. Like film critics, in each half hour episode Forde and a panel of "commercial critics," guests he hand-picks for wittiness and insight, screen four nationally broadcast television commercials, and then dissect them.

## FIERCE BRAND LOYALTY

"There's a skeptic in all of us, and I think that's really what we appeal to," he says. "People love to know how magic tricks work, and they love to watch us break down their favorite TV ads, which work in

similar ways. I mean when you think about it, our target market has been brought up on TV. They've watched an average of 500,000 commercials by the time they're adults, and nobody's ever talked to them about these ads. This is a big change from prior generations. These viewers, in the 20-50 age brackets, are smart, and they're very savvy. They love the show because it's refreshing. It provides tools for them to manage what has become one of the most dominant forces in their lives. That tends to build powerful audience loyalty."

Loyalty, Forde says, that has moved just about everybody who's taken a look at the show.

In fact, he's got quite an impressive collection of reviews and endorsements.

Bill Moyers, the trusted host of



essence of good citizenry in a democracy. But then he says the main thing viewers get out of the show is fun.

"It's a blast! I mean come on, it's like the old game shows except it's about TV commercials. It's like this communal bonding we have over something that has affected us all, and now somebody's finally talking about it. People in the audience hear the panelists go off about something hilarious and they say 'exactly! That was my experience too! So I'm not

crazy! Well, maybe I am crazy, but there's other crazy people out there too.' It's basically like this great college beer party conversation, except we've got a critical edge."

the new hit PBS series NOW, has called Mental Engineering "The most interesting weekly half hour of social commentary on television." The AP describes Forde, the show's host, as "Jim Carrey with a Master's Degree," and the New York Times says "Mental Engineering could not be more relevant."

It's a formula that has worked. Forde's show is the first show in TV history to grow from a

nutshell.



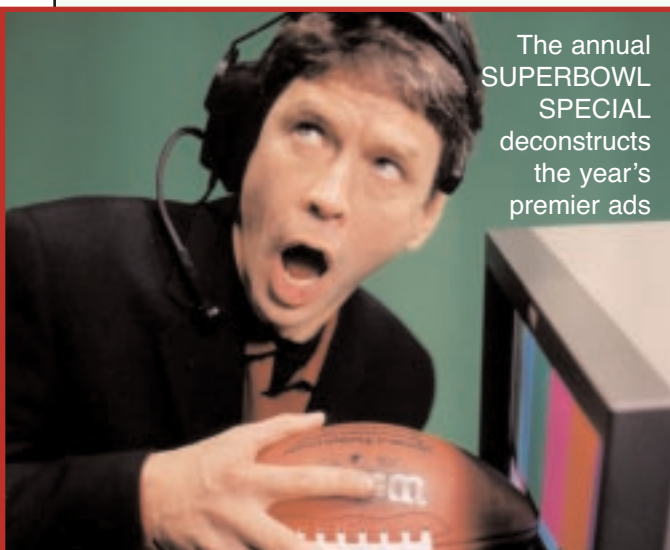
cable access series into a prime time nationwide broadcast.

"You talk about brand loyalty," he says with a wink. "You couldn't grow like we have unless you hold onto your viewers and keep adding more." But then, he admits, he has taken a few lessons at the feet of the masters. "Well, you break cars down long enough, pretty soon you know how to build a pretty good car. Don't you? I mean it's easy. You want to make it smart, sexy and fun."

Mental Engineering, in a nutshell.

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FUN

In rare moments when he waxes philosophical about the reason for the show's lasting impressions on people, Forde will tell you that he's passionate about critical thinking, about giving people the tools to navigate a world that seeks to manipulate them, and about the



The annual SUPERBOWL SPECIAL deconstructs the year's premier ads

**"We're TV ad critics," says Forde. TV Barn calls the show "more nuanced than EBERT AND ROEPER."**