

Original source: http://www.the-signal.com/?module=displaystory&story_id=53077&format=html

Spinning Up a Tough Super Bowl Ad, Part 2

The 'Mad Science' of Ford's 'Centrifuge' spot, shot at NTS in Canyon Country.

By Stephen K. Peeples
Signal Web Content Editor



A vision in their heads until now, Ryan Lee (left), J. Walter Thompson art director, and Scott Lenfestey, JWT ad writer, check out the final "Centrifuge" setup.



Kelly Trudell (left), JWT producer, and Mike Rowe, Ford truck spokesman, prep for the spin to begin as line producer Nicolas Paine (background) clears everyone from the NTS centrifuge pit.

Continuing where Part 1 left off...

Out of Their Heads

The "Centrifuge" concept developed in the fertile minds of Detroit-based J. Walter Thompson staff ad writer Scott Lenfestey and staff art director Ryan Lee.

"Scott threw the idea out there," Lee said.

"It just came out," Lenfestey said. "I wondered, 'What if we spun the truck around somehow?'"

"Then we started asking, 'How would you do that? Maybe like a centrifuge like they use with the astronauts,'" Lee said. "Originally we thought of an inside testing place, but it kind of evolved a little bit."

"We were thinking [the film company] would have to build one, but our director, Tom Barron, was looking around and found this right in his own back yard." To work for the commercial, the centrifuge needed some modification: "We excavated the whole thing and poured concrete in there," Lenfestey said.

"You can go big and come up with crazy ideas, but to keep them real is what I think is cool about this," he added. "We're not attaching safety cables and faking it. We're really putting the product to the test."

Lee agreed. "Everything we do in these Ford spots has to be real. You can't have any camera tricks; otherwise we'd have to include a disclaimer. We have our lawyer here, actually, and he goes over everything to make sure we are being truthful, and we are."

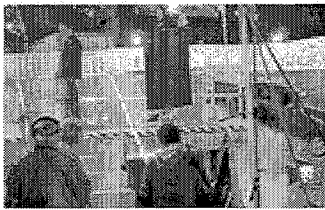
Lee said they go to great lengths to prove the test is legit: "The 'making-of' video our behind-the-scenes camera guy shot for YouTube is out there so everyone can see that we really did this. There is a lot of doubt, because this is so ridiculous - like you couldn't really spin a truck on a centrifuge - but the proof's in the pudding."

Lenfestey said he and Lee aren't always able to get out of the office and onto the set. "Just being here is incredible. To be able to come up with ideas like this and come out here to California and see them come to fruition is just amazing."

Spinning into NTS



Sal Lumetta of Luminary Films (left) asks John Rehard of NTS to start spinning the NTS centrifuge for the first takes of a Ford F-150 TV spot.



Mike Rowe preps for a take as NTS' centrifuge spins a Ford F-150 behind him, with (L-R) assistant director Bill Hannah, director Tom Barron and agency producer Kelly Trudell ready to call "Action!"



A closeup of the heavy-duty chains that linked the Ford F-150's front-end tow hooks to the NTS centrifuge, taken as the truck flew by at 60 mph.

NTS was founded in 1961 by Aaron Cohen and Jack Lin and first known as AETL (Approved Engineering Test Laboratories). In the 1980s the operation became National Technical Systems; today it's known as NTS (publicly traded as NTSC on NASDAQ), and it conducts sophisticated testing services for a variety of business and government clients.

"We've never done anything like this before for commercials or TV or movies," said NTS special projects engineer John W. Rehard Jr., a 35-year veteran of the company. "But we had the only centrifuge the producers could find that was available. They went even to Russia and NASA. Most of them are also enclosed, but ours is outdoors. It's also the largest centrifuge in the world."

"It was originally owned by another company called Component Evaluation Labs, which we bought in 1971 or 1972," Cohen said. "The centrifuge was actually located out in Fontana and we moved it here back then. It originally produced 1,000 G's of force but we reduced it to 500. We've used it to test lots of things. We've spun rocket motors to bombs to just parts that go in any kind of aircraft or missile - stress tests, acceleration, things like that."

Mad Science

About four months of testing and setup preceded filming. Barron heard about the NTS centrifuge from a local friend and contacted Ford.

"I talked the Ford guys into supplying a stock section of the truck, so before we did any kind of on-camera business, we put a piece of truck onto the centrifuge, sent it up to speed, took pictures, and showed them it could really work," Barron said. "At that point (Ford) had the confidence to go ahead with the commercial. Prior to that it was a little too scary."

From there, NTS worked with Barron and Luminary Films to "dress the set" and engineer the full-truck spin seen in the commercial.

"NTS was a great facility for us because they had a pre-built centrifuge that we knew work, that could carry the load, and get up to the speeds necessary," said Salvatore Lumetta, Luminary Films principal and "Centrifuge" executive producer.

"We let (Luminary) modify the centrifuge's pit area on-site, building it out so it could handle this truck and its length, both at rest, and at full spin," Rehard said. "The main base of the centrifuge is seven and a half feet tall, and they dug out another 10 feet from the bottom of this pit around the centrifuge to accommodate the 22-foot length of this truck when it's hanging from the tow-hooks. Then we raised the top of the centrifuge arm up about another seven feet so it allowed enough room for the truck.

"We also moved the walls back," Rehard continued. "When the truck is spinning, centrifugal force will make its rear end rise up so it's almost horizontal with the centrifuge arm. Then the film company poured the concrete on the pit's bottom and sides and fixed it up until it was what the producer wanted to see."

Lumetta noted there were a couple of challenges in pre-testing the full-truck demonstration. "Number one was the vehicle itself, to make sure that what we were doing would be possible,"

he said. "We wanted to be sure that when we're pulling the tow hooks, we're actually using them the way they were intended to be used, to approximate the force necessary to pull a trailer or pull up tree stumps. For safety reasons, the tow hooks are made to shear off in accidents at a certain point. We wanted to make sure we eliminated the chance the hooks would detach while the truck was spinning."

To do that, Lumetta said, "We did a lot of what we call 'mad science' to be able to develop the amount of G-force the hooks can take, the amount of G-force across the full length of the vehicle, what the ceiling is going to be, what happens when it gets up to speed - a lot of math and science went into figuring out what those formulas were before we even got into the visual creative side of it."

Epilog: Lunch Break

□ With several good takes in the can by 10:30 p.m., Barron called a lunch break for his crew, numbering "dozens and dozens," by his count. While the first wave headed toward the catering truck, he spent several minutes with Trudell, Lumetta, line producer Nicolas Paine, Ford truck and SUV PR guy Todd Eckert, ad writer Lenfestey and art director Lee watching playbacks of the takes. They were all very pleased.

"Mike Rowe is amazing," Barron said a few minutes later, standing at the window of the on-set catering truck waiting for his plate of gourmet grub. "He's a great guy to work with, he's got his character firmly in hand, and he also provides us with a lot of variations and versions, which is always important because there are a lot of nuances in a TV commercial. A lot of actors get stumble-foot. Not Mike."

Rowe, plateful of food in hand, overheard Barron invoking his name and returned the compliment. "I'd be nothing without Tom, nothing but a Christmas ham standing here, mute and stupid as the davenport," Rowe cracked. "'Scuse me, I'm going to eat dinner now. Usually, Tom chews this for me and spits it into my mouth like a mother bird, but today I'm going to try it alone."

Barron laughed. "The people here at the NTS facility have also been just terrific," he added. "They've been very helpful with working out some of the technical issues but also frankly being our hosts. It's a working facility and the whole time we've been building the commercial, they've been carrying on their tests, so we've gotten used to the protocols about safety and turning off our cell phones and all the rest because there's a lot of equipment and a lot of testing going on around us."

Spot writer Lenfestey was also pumped after the first series of "keeper" takes. "I can't wait to get into edit and start putting shots together and making the drama come out even further," he said. "When we get into the studio next week, it's going to be rock 'n' roll time!"

***Click here** for a sidebar about Mike Rowe's meet-and-greet with a large group of NTS staffers and their kids, all big fans of "Dirty Jobs."*

To view the "Making of 'Centrifuge'" behind-the-scenes video, as well as other commercials and making-of documentary clips from the "Built Ford Tough" campaign, visit <http://F150BehindTheScenes.com>. You may also find campaign spots and clips on YouTube (youtube.com; search "ford f-150"). Find out more about JWT's Ford division at teamdetroit.com and about NTS at ntscorp.com/about/history.html.

speeples@the-signal.com

Copyright: The Signal