

Brand Communications at its best | Abercrombie & Fitch

Abercrombie & Fitch

*Abercrombie & Fitch have launched their brand across 'the pond'. Simon Rayner, of Essence Communications, explores the brand's success in America and wonders if it can translate.*

Abercrombie & Fitch markets itself as being more than just a clothing store - it's a brand that assures their customers of a lifestyle, the all-American dream; an exclusive club to join. And why would the consumer want to buy into this? The answers are on the glossy paper bags, in the sleek store interiors and on the tips of the tongues of the beautiful sales assistants. In fact, it seems the answers behind the power of Abercrombie lie everywhere, but in the clothes themselves.

"Classic, yet contemporary" is the running theme for Abercrombie & Fitch architecture. The exterior of the store gleams, pristine white, while the faint glimmer of atmospheric lighting from the interior entices one in. Above, the store name stands boldly; the simple, black font is back-lit, ensuring the clean, crisp frontage looks manicured, at every inch. Rather clever, by design, as it offends no-one, while they can still filter through modern fads. British shoppers are familiar with this style from many brands like Hugo Boss, DKNY, Calvin Klein and Reiss, to name a few. But not all of these brands have positioned themselves just off Saville Row. Are they hoping to attract Oxbridge chaps who have a tailor next door?

Abercrombie & Fitch's heritage is very real and they do have a history dating back to 1892, starting as a sporting goods company, and in recent years, 'gone' trendy - a bit like our Burberry or Pringle. Describing their product as "casual luxury clothing", A&F is essentially a youth brand (often reported as a 'teen retailer'), but sits comfortably on the all-ages-fence, made famous by contemporaries, such as The Gap, French Connection and Benetton (even Topshop, now). The style is interchangeable; by example, the extensive colour-ways available for all vests, tops and separates. Once again, this keeps their market open because, while A&F are selling a very distinct and clear brand image, the consumer has so wide a choice, that A&F can hardly alienate any age group.



The conditioning of the consumer, to the Abercrombie & Fitch lifestyle, takes place before they enter the store, via the stylized shop fronts, the branded clothing style and the distinctive packaging. However, the real lifestyle experience takes place inside the store. Upon entering, the customer meets the sales assistant, who is not just attentive and well versed, but most times, model-esque - the perfect clothes horse. Draped against a backdrop of extremely subdued lighting and a wall of clubby music, they have been talent-spotted into their jobs by the lure of being "in-store models", rather than sales assistants. It's not unusual to sight their trademark, topless, male models loitering at the door to greet the happy consumer. Sales assistant and models alike, Abercrombie have carefully hand-picked these people because they make for perfect brand ambassadors, complete with jaw-aching smiles. After all, you're not merely buying clothes, one is buying a brand message - these clothes make you the all-



American-Hero, they make you tanned, beautiful, and popular. Having the physical embodiment in the shop proves that the smiling face on the bag is a tangible image. Yes, the Abercrombie & Fitch dream exists and the dream is helping you pick out the style of jeans you're about to buy! The brand has had some of its US catalogues banned for being too racy and criticised as 'soft porn'. Are the British public going to be intimidated by the 'beautiful people' or seduced?

Abercrombie & Fitch go that one step further to make sure that the consumer is hit from every angle, transforming the brand from an image, to a complete concept. How do they enhance this? Abercrombie ensure they do everything possible

to make their perceived brand image live and breathe. Simply reinforcing a brand image is not enough for making a complete lifestyle. They dictate what the customer reads; producing an in-store magazine which follows the online, as well as, in-store branding. Once again, the clothes are only a marginal factor while the magazine presents its readers with all the know-how of the A&F lifestyle; from grooming to cultural events.

I cannot see them adapting the brand to suite a localised aspiration. For Abercrombie and Fitch, brand protection is a big part of their continuing US success. Customers can only purchase up to 20 items at any one time, to ensure that the market place is never flooded. It also makes sure that the shops' limited-runs are not diluted. Brand protection means they can retain exclusivity - thus the elite club that is A&F, retains its spear head, as the leading, youth clothing brand. Why else have a toll-free number to report fake A&F spottings?

If all you have to do to join this club, is buy the clothes, does this mean that you too, will be saying, "Look at me! I am everything the Abercrombie & Fitch lifestyle stands for; I am tanned, I am popular and I am beautiful!"?

One is left wondering whether expansion is a good thing, for the Abercrombie & Fitch legacy, especially into the notoriously tricky, British market.

Can this untarnished image make a splash across the pond and translate into Queen's English? Will the Collegiate-inspired, American hero travel well? It's been reported that this "teen brand" is charging very grown-up prices over here; almost double, for the exact same garment, Stateside!

