

Abercrombie has **XXL-sized problem**

There are few bigger fans of Abercrombie & Fitch than me. I may not be able to squeeze into any of its clothing, but this is a company that fits perfectly with my idea of what makes a great brand.

Founded in 1892 by David T Abercrombie, it took A&F a century to move away from its stuffy outfitter image. The key to this transformation was Mike Jeffries, who took over stewardship of the brand in 1992. From the outset, he positioned A&F around youth and sex with a targeting strategy that explicitly communicated that the brand was only for the young, the thin and the beautiful. Jeffries was entirely comfortable with the idea of excluding most segments from his brand, once responding: 'Are we exclusionary? Absolutely, some people don't belong in our clothing and they can't belong.'

And so to London. In March last year, A&F opened its first European flagship store on Burlington Gardens, just off Savile Row – and what a shop it is. The next time you find yourself in the capital, this should be your first destination. A&F has taken the idea of brand experience to the very brink, and then dived off the edge.

The huge building is testament to A&F's total brand vision and maniacal target marketing. The first thing you notice is... nothing. The store has almost no signage. The only way to find it is for someone to tell you where it is. When you do arrive, you meet a perfectly toned 20-something male model, who stands nonchalantly in the doorway wearing only his underwear. Then comes the interior and lighting, so dim that the eyes of anyone over 20 will struggle to

see any of the clothes on display. A cool soundtrack has been turned all the way up to 11 to make the place unpleasant to the ear of anyone born before 1985. And finally there are the queues. The store has been consistently raking in £1m a week since it opened. The lines of consumers waiting to pay (if you can see them in the gloom) snake throughout the building.



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Of course, Jeffries and his team are having a great time. In the US, A&F is a massive, established business with growth ratios and store comparison statistics, but in Europe it is represented by a single store that can be cool and exclusive. A&F can play at being a niche fashion brand, free from commercial cares and the usual contradiction of making money from the masses while preserving the 'exclusive' cachet. Except



for one small hitch. Well, not so much small as size XXL.

The one segment that has been most attracted to A&F in the UK so far is the one segment Jeffries has worked so hard to repulse. An army of fat men in their late 30s is squeezing into the brand's very recognisable clothing.

Don't believe me? I'll make a bet with you. The next time you see the A&F signage on a T-shirt, or its moose logo on a polo shirt, I'll bet its not attached to the svelte shoulders of a 20-something Adonis. It will be stretched across the flaccid girth of a balding and out-of-shape bloke who fancies himself. One truth of marketing is that people want what they cannot have. Young, beautiful British kids are attracted to A&F, but not half as much as the trend-surfing 30-something who does not realise that his fashion days are over.

A&F's exclusive positioning, limited availability and new market entry make it extremely vulnerable to any inconsistency. If the wrong type of person continues to sport the brand in increasing numbers then Jeffries and his team may need to rapidly rethink their strategy. Maybe it is time to get rid of XXL and XL, and with them all the consumers who really don't belong in A&F. Jeffries knows better than anyone the need to exclude.

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30 seconds on... the wisdom of Mike Jeffries

■ On his **underwear for girls** featuring phrases such as 'Eye Candy' and 'Wink Wink' printed on them: 'People said we were cynical, that we were **sexualising little girls**. But you know what? I still think those are cute underwear for little girls. And I think anybody who gets on a bandwagon about thongs for little girls is crazy. Just crazy.'

There's so much craziness about sex in this country.'

■ 'I think that **what we represent sexually is healthy**. It's playful. It's not dark. It's not degrading. And it's not gay, and it's not straight, and it's not black, and it's not white. It's all depicting this wonderful

camaraderie that does not exist in the older generation.'

■ On the importance of **sexual attraction**: 'It's almost everything. That's why we hire **good-looking people** in our stores: because they attract other good-looking people, and we want to market to cool, good-looking people.'