

DESIGN DIALOGUE

Bare-Chested American Design

When Abercrombie and Fitch opened its brand-new flagship store on Paris' famed Avenue des Champs-Élysées, it did it the American way: by flying in 100 surfer-type male models from around the world to stand shirtless in front of the store, baring the requisite A&F washboard abs. The models stood on the storied shopping avenue, hooting and hollering at passersby. One might assume that the Parisians—famous for not covering up their frosty feelings towards Americans—were turned off by this brazen marketing move. So just how did the locals respond? With hundreds of French A&F fans lining up around the block just to get in to the store's front door. Abercrombie quickly became the hottest new club in town, and the hardest to get into.

It was a ballsy move for the quintessentially American company entering into a foreign market—and the bold decisions didn't stop with this PR stunt. A&F bucked the textbook notion that in order to be successful abroad, you need to adapt to the local culture. Instead, the brand is following the same methodology that it uses here in the States to capture consumer attention: it kept its California-cool clothing style the same and hired employees that fit its impossibly beautiful archetype.

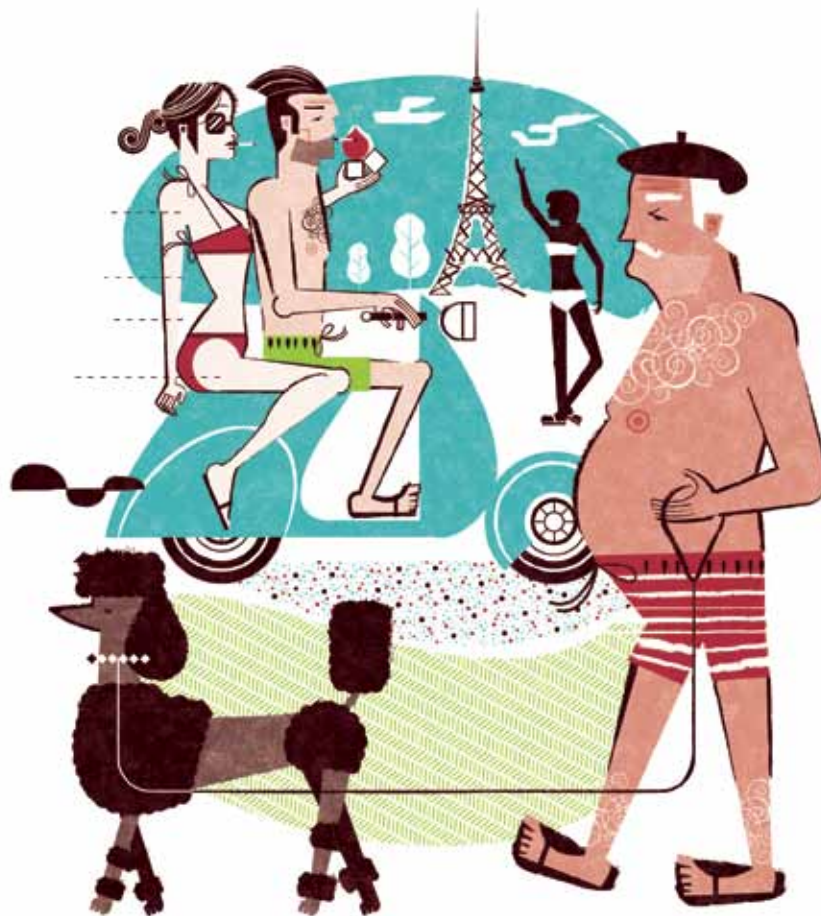
A&F's refusal to assimilate to the European culture has resulted in astounding sales. The company expects its international sales to comprise 30 percent of its overall sales by 2012—a 10 percent jump from the previous year, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. So, what is it about this American brand that has the French in a fashion tizzy?

Global consumers crave authentic American style and design, which plays an important role in selling our products, services, and environments in foreign markets. To them, it all represents the unique promises of America: the land of opportunity, freedom of self and self-expression, freshness, youth, vitality, and the American dream.

And maintaining American style is a competitive advantage for our companies and brands. Apple, Harmon Kardon, and Ralph Lauren are all examples of unmistakably American brands that are highly sought after overseas. American automakers successfully sell cars throughout the world, each one representing the seductive possibility of the literal and metaphorical open road. The draw of Americana even applies to architecture: American firm Cannon Design often does work in China, and it has found that Chinese clients appreciate its attention to detail, investigation of needs in a project, and especially its willingness to take risks—something that's staunchly American.

The “Go West” mentality remains with the US today, driving us to continually search for new ways of interact-

HOW BRANDS LIKE ABERCROMBIE AND FITCH ARE WINNING OVER THE WORLD SIMPLY BY BEING THEMSELVES



Global consumers crave authentic American style and design, which plays an important role in selling our products, services, and environments in foreign markets.

ing with the world. We are still a relatively young country, with a pioneering spirit that continues to make a statement domestically and abroad.

After all, the world's most influential computer company proudly stamps “Designed in California” on the outside of its boxes, regardless of where in the world it is made. ❖

*By Steven Fischer,
Lecturer of Image,
Style & Design at
Northwestern
University and leader
of StyleSalon Chicago*

*Illustration by
Scotty Reifsmnyder*