

Opinion

A Retailer Is Dressed Down

In an attempt to relive its financial heyday of years past, Abercrombie & Fitch underwent a large image makeover. It no longer wanted to be known as "The Greatest Sporting Goods Store in the World." It wanted to be the modern store for the young and hip, known more for the near-naked models on its posters and catalogs than the fact that Theodore Roosevelt and Amelia Earhart used to shop there.

After a bankruptcy and a series of buyouts, Abercrombie succeeded spectacularly in remaking itself as a cool shopping destination for young Americans. It is currently one of the nation's largest retailers, operating approximately 600 stores. But critics are questioning whether Abercrombie's much-promoted "classic American" look requires the wearer to be white as well as hip. The retailer says it does not discriminate, but a sample of the store's catalog on its Web site features models who are all white. This week, former employees filed suit charging racial discrimination in its hiring practices. Former employees of the store charged that the few minorities who were hired often received jobs that placed them out of sight, off the sales floor.

This is not the first time issues have been raised about Abercrombie's racial sensitivity. Last year, the company drew national protests for a series of shirts that offensively depicted Asian-Americans by using stereotypical physical features and language. All this raises questions about whether Abercrombie appreciates what being "modern" really means.