

If you walk casually in Greenwich (New York, City), you will pass right by it. It's a clothing store, owned by Abercrombie & Fitch (A&F), with the name of the store so inconspicuous that you won't notice it. The store front, with no display windows, looks more like a house than a store. The name of the store: Ruehl #925!

Once inside, you will find none of the mega size steamy posters of bare-chested, models that decorate the parent company's stores. Instead you will get a wide range of clothes, a bit more fashionable and a bit more expensive.

Abercrombie & Fitch (A&F) is implementing a life-stage need identification concept. It knows that most of its current customers are college students; when they graduate and enter the job market, they take their patronage, at least for part of their casual wardrobe, elsewhere, such as to stores like Banana Republic or Polo. Now to lure them, the company has embarked a new store concept, where it features casual clothing, still bearing the same urban casual look, of course, but somewhat upgraded in quality, and, correspondingly, in price as well. Its media advertising and in-store poster displays are also subdued as far as overt sexiness is concerned. And the new stores are designed more like a vintage apartment with soft lighting that invites lingering and lounging.

In part it resembles Hollister, the A&F's other brand extension a few years ago. Hollister, you might know, similarly has no visible store front or nameplate, but looks and feels more like an apartment than a store. Walk inside and at the entrance you will find chair and cocktail tables, littered with book and magazines. Merchandise aisles are dimly lighted and are set in meandering lanes so the whole walk thru the store feels more like a walk through a Homorama house. If you buy something, you will have to find the cash register which is set in the center of the store and looks more like a DJ booth in a clubby lounge—yes, with living-room style sofa seating in the foreground. And as you browse through the merchandise, you can watch on giant screens scenes from the surfing haven beaches of California's, so as to experience the surfer lifestyle.

While Hollister appeals to a high school teenage segment a few years younger than a typical, still-in-college A&F customer, Ruehl is designed to capture a just-gradu-

ated, new career person. And like Hollister, Ruehl also sells items beyond the expected, including: vintage books, art, newspapers, magazines and CDs.

What's with the name of the new store chain, Ruehl No. 925! Nine-to-Five, get it?

And Ruehl is a created family name of an imaginary German immigrant. The story on company's Web site goes:

"A German immigrant moved to the United States circa 1850 and opened a fine leather goods shop that stayed in his family for generations. His great grandson, 100 years later, decided to enter the apparel business, focusing on denim and inspired by screen idol James Dean."

Ruehl #925 sells, you see, not just merchandise, but, rather, it tells you a story. It wants you to feel as if, in shopping there and while wearing its merchandise, you are living a story. The question is whether that story is the one you want to live.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Will the store appeal to recent college graduates who are now seeking a more mature, career centered merchandise, and would otherwise go to stores like Banana Republic and Kenneth Cole?
2. How well does the store meet the challenge of looking more mature than but still connected to the A&F image? Should it?
3. "Consumers seeking career wardrobe just want good, stylish career clothing. They are not there for the dimly lighted store atmosphere. They are in other words, more in a "find-the-merchandise, goal-oriented" mode, not in a leisurely browsing mode." Do you agree or disagree, and do you believe the store ambience will hinder or help attract the target group and sell them the merchandise.
4. Design a research study to identify consumer segments to whom the store will appeal? What mindset will make this segment an ideal prospect for the store?

