

by Richard Baker

# The “Diderot Effect,” Understanding the Six Affluent Life Styles 13 May 2009

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[Richard Baker \[http://beta.luxurysociety.com/users/1257\]](#), CEO of [Premium Knowledge Group \[http://www.PremiumKnowledge.net\]](#) and Founder of [The Luxury Marketing Council of Texas \[http://www.texasluxury.net\]](#), shares insights from his forthcoming book, “*The Future of Luxury: The Peacock and the Prius*”, with *Luxury Society* members.

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“Life style” is the result of a pattern of decisions made regarding how to spend, invest, give away or save time, money, attention and other scarce resources, which reflects a basic set of values. It is the organizing principle for the accumulation and signaling of social capital, i.e. wealth.

Through our research we have discovered six basic patterns of decisions, which are the result of six different affluent life styles:

1. **Unmistakable Affluent** (Donald Trump),
2. **Tasteful Affluent** (Ralph Lauren),
3. **Practical Affluent**,
4. **Economical Affluent**,
5. **Understated Affluent**,
6. **Dependable Affluent** (Oprah, Bono).

What is interesting is that each of these life styles can be lived at a variety of price points. Money, in a very real sense, is not the issue. It is the pattern of choices made with the money, the time, etc. There are distinct differences in where the various LifeStyles shop, travel, in what they read and drive, what they eat and drink, etc.

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It might be useful to understand how certain skills and knowledge translate the underlying values (personal drivers) into the selection of attributes whose pattern reflects life style. The story of Diderot, the French philosopher, is a way to illustrate the point. At the beginning of his career Diderot was brilliant but poor. One day a wealthy patron gave him a beautiful silk smoking jacket.

Diderot records in his diary that he went to his poor apartment that evening and put on the jacket. He looked at the cheap wooden furniture, the peeling wallpaper in his apartment. Until that moment they had been acceptable. He realized that the jacket was the finest thing in his apartment, and that he loved the jacket. He loved it because it made him feel the way he wanted to feel in the future. Systematically, as Diderot gained more money, he began replacing everything in his apartment until all his possessions matched the quality of his silk smoking jacket.

As indicated by this brief story, there are several competencies in developing a life style. They do not have to be experienced in this order but eventually they interact in this fashion. Each plays a role in the symbolic language of luxury.

### **Vision of oneself in society or” knowing one’s place.”**

In a democratic, capitalistic society it can also mean, “knowing what you want to become” and where you want to fit in. One identifies the peer group one aspires to, which in social studies is referred to as the “reference group.”

In Diderot’s case, he wanted to be part of the element of society that regularly wore fine smoking jackets for their evening leisure. This also requires having a sense of one’s self. The life style must “fit comfortably” as well as “fit in.”

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## **More info**

From the forthcoming book,  
*“The Future of Luxury: The Peacock and the Prius”*  
by Richard Baker, CEO,  
Premium Knowledge Group

[www.PremiumKnowledge.net](http://www.PremiumKnowledge.net)  
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### **Sense of identity, often seen as a reflection in things surrounding us.**

It is usually recognized that our goods communicate something to others about who we are, what we value, what we are like. What is less frequently described is how we ourselves form a self-image based on the things we possess. To paraphrase, “we think we are the kinds of things we have.” This is not a question of quantity as much as it is a question of quality.

### **Awareness of options.**

If Diderot became aware of the fine smoking jacket because his patron gave it to him, this would be a passive awareness. Or perhaps Diderot had visited his patron’s home and seen such jackets. This would be more active. Society has many ways of bringing the options to our (passive) attention. Media is one of the most common. Or we can be active, for example, by shopping, going to gatherings, talking to others, etc.

### **Discernment: Attention to detail**

Little things make a big difference in the arena of life style. How many threads are in your sheets, the type of wood inlaid in your car, the stitching in your suit, the aromatics in your lotions, etc. The design and structure of things is as much a part of their quality as the materials from which they are made.

Notice, Diderot was not taken by the cost of the jacket but by the quality. His challenge became to learn or observe enough about other things to select items of similar quality. What type of material for a chair is a parallel in quality to silk in a jacket? What design would go with the rest of his lodging?

### **A sense of symmetry; the ability to “edit.”**

Having a life style requires discipline. Time, attention, and often money, are scarce resources. The beauty of a life style is that it provides guidance regarding what to do or not do, what’s worth having (to you) or not having.

An analysis of these six different affluent life styles provided the foundation for a research project that uncovered the key drivers of purchase for each psychographic group. Understanding purchase motivation provides a powerful strategic that luxury brand marketers can use to develop effective communications and carefully targeted marketing campaigns. We will continue this discussion in further chapters.