

In a recent speech, Mary Beth West, CMO of Kraft Foods, noted that it's more important than ever to "walk not just a mile in our consumers' shoes, but two miles."

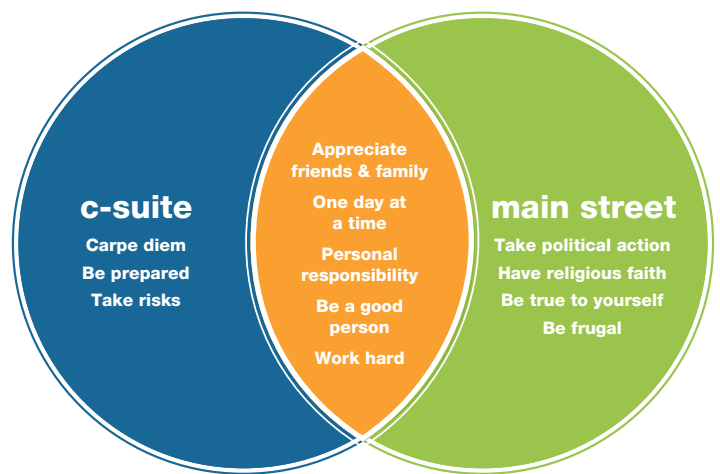
With the economy still in freefall and consumers making tough choices about if and where to allocate their vanishing cash, it's more crucial than ever that business leaders grasp where their own lives, experiences, values, concerns, and aspirations do and don't intersect with those of their customers. To further that understanding, Communispace Corporation, a leading provider of private customer communities to drive insight and innovation, invited 56 CMOs, CEOs, and Brand Managers and 529 consumers who belong to our private, online communities to take a survey about their behaviors, plans, beliefs, and aspirations in these especially challenging times.

The results tell starkly contrasting stories of Simplifying vs. Struggling, Reflection vs. Recrimination, and Faith in Self vs. Faith in External Forces. While C-Suite is cutting back, Main Street is challenged to acquire the basics of food, housing, and healthcare. While C-Suite is seizing on the current crisis as an opportunity to reassess their values and choices, Main Street is alienated and enraged, blaming corporate executives and themselves for failures and mistakes. While C-Suite respondents look inward for control over their destinies, many on Main Street place equal responsibility in God or government.

But as polarized as the feelings and needs of these two groups are, there are also some surprising commonalities in their hopes, values, and beliefs. Both groups crave free time and cherish loved ones. Both see themselves as "managers" or "executives" – of their own lives and households, if not of corporations. And despite Main Street's feelings of enormous anger at the greed,

incompetence, luck, and/or connections of C-Suite, both groups share a belief that even now:

1. Hard work makes it possible for anyone to get ahead
2. In the pervasive language of 12-Step programs – it's important to take life one day at a time, to change the things one can and accept the things one can't
3. One should aspire to live by the "golden rule"



And the message for marketers now, in a period of intense populism and class consciousness, is not radically different than what's always been at the heart of brand relationships: Don't try to suggest that "we're all in the same boat" or that "we brought this on ourselves." Instead, recognize your customers' needs, acknowledge their hard work and determination, and most importantly, speak to their aspirations, because it's in that domain of hope and longing that C-Suite and Main Street have the most in common. It is there that authentic communication can occur.

