Corporate stewardship was in vogue in the 80s and 90s. Companies strived to be seen as protectors of environmental and social good. But stewardship can also hold sustainability and CSR practitioners back. While stewardship is about preservation and protection, it is also about oversight, management and exerting influence. It is when this credo creeps into today’s corporate sustainability and CSR frameworks that things get tricky.

Practitioners have been warned not to conflate sustainability with CSR. They should administer the same caution with the stewardship credo, making sure that well-intentioned corporate efforts don’t fall short.

Take, for instance, a mining company. This company might strive toward community stewardship by building local schools and hospitals to protect a community’s right to education and healthcare. But this approach can impose long-term liabilities. Schools and hospitals require staff and ongoing servicing. Without a well-executed plan, well-intentioned measures quickly turn obsolete.

Companies need to move beyond stewardship to citizenship. Citizenship is not about getting consumers to buy products. It’s more, too, than getting buy-in to a corporate vision. Citizenship is about dialogue among citizens, whether that citizen is a corporate citizen – a company – an employee, a consumer, an activist or simply an individual stakeholder. Particularly for companies, it’s about integrating that dialogue into decision-making. Done well, it means that a school, hospital or any well-intentioned project will be equipped for long-term success – whether or not a company is around for the life of a project.

But in an online era of hashtags and likes, what does a dialogue “done well” look like? What value – if any – can social media afford practitioners?
A recent study by Dr. Glen Whelan, Jeremy Moon and Bettina Grant of Nottingham University Business School shows how social media can create opportunities for dialogue.

Social Media Levels the Playing Field

Social media can be an important conduit to fostering a sense of community and open dialogue. Yet, engaging in social media is not without risk. Online platforms have increased accessibility to information creation and dissemination. Companies can no longer rest on PR departments to drive their agendas. There are ample opportunities for individual citizens to advocate their interests and concerns. According to Whelan and his colleagues, social media levels the playing field between corporations and individual citizens.

Two striking examples show how citizens used social media to successfully challenge corporations.

Case 1: Starbucks
In 2007, Rui Chenggang, a Chinese media personality, claimed that Starbucks “undermined the Forbidden City’s solemnity and trampled over Chinese culture.” In an act of defiance against the global coffee store chain, Rui Chenggang launched an online anti-Starbucks campaign. Six months later, the media starlet generated enough pressure to force the closure of the Starbucks outlet in the Forbidden City.

Case 2: Mango
In 2013, Mango, a Catalan retail giant, faced swift and harsh criticism over the release of a jewelry line they inappropriately marketed as slave-style jewelry. Outraged at the trivialization of slavery, the public took to Twitter. Mango responded by renaming the jewelry line and making a public apology via Twitter.

The cases above illustrate that companies cannot – and should not – avoid social media. The question practitioners need to ask is not whether to embrace social media, but how to use social media in the context of CSR.

Why Companies Need to Build a Community, not a Following

Social media has a different role in sustainability than it does within traditional sales and marketing campaigns. Twitter can be a great way to entice consumers with product offers and
drive conversions, but tactics that drive sales are unlikely to meet your sustainability goals. In the sustainability space, community building holds the trump card.

**Social media can create a network spanning citizens and corporation** – a network that is multi-directional, accessible and inclusive by nature. It can help corporations understand not only consumers, but also the communities in which they operate.

McDonald’s Canada “Our Food. Your Questions” campaign is a pioneer in fostering progressive relations through social media. The company sought to understand its place in the greater Canadian community by provoking unfiltered questions and answering those questions honestly. The campaign continues to trail blaze toward transparency, fielding questions like “Is the thing about the Chicken McNuggets true?” and “Why is your food so cheap?” from anyone and everyone.

“Transparency is now a currency, and that currency gains trust,” explains Adrian Capobianco in an interview with the Financial Post. Capobianco, managing director at Cundari, a marketing agency, understands the importance of trust. Trust is an elemental nugget of the campaign; it is also critical to the community that McDonald’s Canada is trying to reach.

Companies that fail to understand their place within a community risk project derailment and public scrutiny. If, instead, they embrace the tenets of citizenship and encourage dialogue, they are taking an important step toward community engagement.

**Takeaways**

1. **Social media leaves nowhere to hide.** Proactively engage with your customers and communities so that you can understand their views and respond to their needs.
2. **Break out of the 'corporate knows best' mindset.** Aim to build understanding and trust through open dialogue. This way you will develop a more nuanced view of how your company affects the communities in which it operates.
3. **Complement communication with social media.** You will need more than 140 characters to effectively engage communities. But embracing social media can create an open, accessible and multi-directional line of communication that can augment dialogue.