

Letter carrier conversation



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Dine

Last month, we discussed how NALC's top legislative priority of the past dozen years—the reform necessary to protect and preserve the people's postal service—had finally achieved passage in the House. How an uphill battle that faced daunting obstacles—and determined adversaries—had succeeded despite the bitterly polarized period we are in.

With the measure's subsequent passage by a Senate that is even more narrowly divided than the House, followed by the bill's movement to the White House for the presidential signature to make it law, it's worth digging a little deeper into the breakthrough that materialized, and what lessons we—and the labor movement writ large—can extract.

Let's start (and end) with the most important takeaway of all, which involves what you did and how you did it.

It's not just that you informed everyone who would listen, that you motivated the public and the lawmakers by your yoman's work, that you drew attention to the continuing value of the Postal Service in a technological era.

You did something more basic yet more profound—and, ultimately, more powerful.

You had a conversation with America.

This dialogue took place throughout the country, utilizing innumerable vehicles. You spoke to folks in little towns and large cities, in rural areas and in suburbs, doing so in the pages of small weeklies and community newspapers and metro dailies, via your letters to the editor and op-eds and your participation in news stories, through your interviews on local radio stations or on network television affiliates in your area. No audience was written off as insufficiently important; you never knew who might be reading your words or listening to them, or what they might do with what they had just learned.

You did not succumb to the all-too-common reliance on national media outlets. Notwithstanding their glamour and the buzz they can generate, those news organizations are not only more difficult targets to penetrate, they also tend to be distrusted by the people where you live. They are widely viewed as distant and politicized, and using them to get your message across often means talking to folks—or, better put, *at* folks—from afar. Your approach, on the contrary, involved talking *with* them, with the people who live where you do.

This was more demanding, because to achieve the same reach you had to continually be in the newspapers or on the airwaves, given the more modest audiences. But you benefited from the ripple effects and resonance of omnipresent cov-

erage from outlets your neighbors or customers know and rely on. Over time, your persistence and perseverance prevailed.

The second aspect of your conversation with people in every part of the country involved the content. While you reached out through a myriad of outlets, your message was singular, focused and disciplined. You explained that this was a manufactured financial crisis (poor public policy in the form of the pre-funding mandate), what it wasn't (technological obsolescence), and the solution (fix the faulty policy).

Your tone was equally important. You didn't politicize things, you didn't castigate anyone, you didn't engage in hyperbole, you didn't throw the kitchen sink at the issue; you calmly communicated a coherent, easy-to-follow narrative. Rather than appeal to people's partisan preferences, you appealed to their reason. You cut through the noise and the conventional wisdom to clarify both the issue and the stakes. You showed that letter carriers, and the Postal Service itself, were not seeking favors but merely fairness.

We have long known that people like the Postal Service. But we also knew that many were discouraged, having been told that USPS was losing billions of dollars a year because of the internet, that taxpayer dollars were involved (they weren't) and that cuts in postal service, or worse, were inevitable.

We needed to pierce through these mistruths. That's where you stepped in—and stepped up, by enlightening people who trusted you about what the core of the problem was—public policy blunders. You didn't assert it; you demonstrated it through unassailable logic.

Folks around you understood, and they made sure their representatives in Washington did as well. That was a game-changer. Your efforts set the predicate, the groundwork, for the politicians—who don't like to be out in front of the electorate—to act, confident they were reflecting public sentiment, confident they were doing what was right.

A proud and iconic national institution, enshrined in the Constitution and as critical as ever to the nation's growth and future, owes much to you.

History will note what you have done. With any luck, others fighting for positive change in our country will note it, too.

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