

Having a conversation



**Philip
Dine**

Why, one might ask, have you had so much success in influencing public discussion about the U.S. Postal Service?

I was thinking about that the other day, and while the answer is pretty simple, it's not necessarily obvious.

So let's ponder this for a moment.

Yes, letter carriers benefit from strong credibility, so people tend to trust what you write or say.

Yes, we have the facts on our side and therefore have a persuasive story to tell.

And yes, people like the Postal Service and welcome learning that the financial challenges are the result of flawed public policy that can be changed.

But there's more to it.

Those are the built-in advantages you possess when you set out—as so many of you do—to communicate our message in an effort to reshape public opinion.

But they wouldn't make much difference if you didn't go about telling our story the right way.

I read your commentaries and letters on editorial pages and your quotes in news stories; I listen to what you say on radio and in your interviews on TV, and here's what they all have in common:

You are having a conversation with the public.

Nothing more, nothing less.

You aren't arguing, criticizing opponents, engaging in polemics, trying to settle political scores. You're simply providing information often lacking in the public and political arenas, explaining things that folks might not know about postal finances, noting the value USPS and letter carriers deliver to customers and communities and the nation as a whole.

And you never sound angry or self-serving. You make your case in conversational tones and with fact-based points. You don't make this about letter carriers or our union or our employer—you make it about the people whose homes and neighborhoods you serve.

The folks you're having the conversation with.

Were it not for the approach you uniformly have adopted, our effort to dispel the misleading conventional wisdom and to get across the real story—an effort critical to the future of USPS and of our jobs—would fall short.

I thought a lot about this kind of thing a ways back. First as a reporter, when the inability or unwillingness of so many labor organizations to get out their message continually amazed me. And then as I spoke to union conventions—service sector, education, transportation, manufacturing, construction, public sector—about the imperative of reaching out to the public

in constructive ways and with a coherent message, instead of sending out flurries of jargon-filled press releases on this or that narrow topic. Of, in short, having a broad conversation with Americans not focused on labor's issues but rather on why people should care in the first place. Let's just say that the labor movement is still trying.

You folks are a case study in doing it right.

It's not only how we deliver our message, but where we deliver it.

Too many organizations assume that the bigger the platform the better. But in fact, the closer the media outlet is to the audience, the more resonance it generally provides—because it's seen as a part of local life instead of as a national, even elitist, media platform with a political agenda.

Communicating via regional or community outlets involves more work because their reach is smaller and so you have to do more of it, but the effort is worth it. That's especially true for organizations like unions that depend on grassroots support. Balance that with some national media exposure or outlets aimed at key audiences, and you've got a winning formula.

For a microcosm of that, take a look at what President Roland accomplished recently, with a sweep of powerful commentaries across the northern tier of the Heartland: Michigan's *Tri-County Times*; Montana's *Billings Gazette* and *Montana Standard*; Wisconsin's *Amery Free Press*, *Burnett County Sentinel* and *Osceola Sun*; Minnesota's *County Messenger*; and Iowa's *Times-Republican*. He complemented that with an op-ed in *The Hill*—meaning he reached members of Congress and a broad swath of their constituents.

And, of course, it's *who* delivers our message. The breadth of our messengers—from national officers to grassroots members—is another element that separates NALC from most unions, which typically rely solely on a top officer or two.

We have an advantage here. Our members are all letter carriers and therefore invested, informed—and respected.

These are important times. Legislative activity, lots of issues, a new administration and a new Congress. So, I'd like to issue a challenge to those waiting to participate: Get involved. Communicate our message.

Have that conversation in your community.

EDITORIAL STAFF:
Managing Editor Philip Dine
Designer/Web Editor Mike Shea
Internet Communications Coordinator
Joe Conway
Writer/Editor Rick Hodges
Editorial Assistant Jenessa Wagner

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