

Theory and practice



**Philip
Dine**

Given the importance of communicating our message in this evolving political and legislative environment, I'd like to provide some thoughts on doing so—before switching to a textbook case of the NALC doing exactly that.

We've addressed recently the practical aspects involved in getting our voice out through the media, such as how to effectively approach a newspaper or other outlets.

And in a future column, I'll discuss writing a commentary in ways likely to appeal to editors who make decisions on whether a piece runs, and to readers whose representatives in Congress make decisions on whether the U.S. Postal Service flourishes.

But there's a key—if underrated—step between initially approaching a media outlet and subsequently turning out a well-written piece. That key step is organizing your thoughts in coherent and concise fashion.

When I worked as an editor on the City Desk at a metropolitan newspaper, if I saw a reporter wrestling with a complex article, I'd suggest that he stop writing. Log off your computer, I'd tell him. Just grab a notepad and a pen, find a quiet room, and spend some time with your thoughts.

Initially, that kind of advice produced some blank stares, and some questions.

After a while, it began producing an occasional "thank you." Why? Because the key to good writing isn't choosing great words—it's clear thinking. Any piece of journalistic writing that works—whether a news story or an opinion piece—begins with a clear overall sense of what you want to say and then a coherent plan of how to organize the points that best make your case.

Once you have that nailed down, you'll find your words with surprising ease. And the time invested at the outset will speed up the whole process.

So when you're trying to compose an op-ed piece or a letter to the editor, before staring at a blank screen for an hour wondering how to start or precisely what words to choose, spend 10 minutes with that legal pad—or with a napkin or the back of an envelope.

Let's say your task is to rebut an editorial that claims the Postal Service is a money-losing dinosaur because of the internet.

Well, what's your over-arching message? Maybe that the editorial's conventional wisdom sounds reasonable, but in fact is entirely wrong. What are the points that buttress your argument? That USPS has had operating profits for years now. That

the growing revenue is attributable in part to internet-generated online shopping that has boosted package revenue. That the red ink that does exist stems not from technology but from the congressional pre-funding mandate.

There, in a few minutes, you've mapped out your three or four paragraphs (your plan of action) and the heavy lifting is done. Just add some words.

Speaking of heavy lifting, let's look at the recent communications efforts of NALC's president for an example of, well, leading by example.

Over a couple of weeks, President Rolando brought our message to the pages of the *Weatherford Democrat* of Texas; to Indiana's *Tribune-Star*, *News and Tribune*, *Daily News* and *Herald-Tribune*; and to two of the country's leading conservative media outlets: the *Washington Examiner* and *Townhall*, both widely read on Capitol Hill.

Getting our own voice into the public sphere is, of course, one part of the communications effort—the other is to influence news stories written by reporters.

On that key score, President Rolando was quoted in a Federal News Radio story about postal legislation. Then his Feb. 7 testimony to the House committee considering such legislation was covered by the *Washington Post*, the *Hill*, Federal News Radio and newspapers ranging from Florida to Colorado to Texas.

Two days later, when USPS released its financial report for the first quarter of Fiscal Year 2017, our president's comments and analysis helped shape the national coverage, much of that through the Associated Press story, which was used by the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *San Jose Mercury News*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *San Diego Union Tribune*, *Detroit News* and *Tulsa World* as well as US News, CNBC and Fox Business News. Separate stories quoting President Rolando were done by *Government Executive* and Federal News Radio.

NALC's message is resonating—and making a difference—partly because of the efforts of rank-and-file members as well as branch and state officers. Much of that has been on display this past month. And as the recent period shows, strong leadership at the national level is an indispensable component.

Now, let's complement that by grabbing some notepads....

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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