

## Engage, smartly



**Philip Dine**

**I**n recent months, we've focused on tales of letter carrier heroism, extraordinary service and unique communications skills.

Today I'll return to the theme of getting our message out. That is, of course, a core function of the Department of Communications and Media Relations. More than most institutions, NALC—and our employer, the Postal Service—are greatly affected by both public and lawmaker sentiment.

**This is a pivotal time for NALC's** messaging effort, with multiple moving parts to the postal picture, much at stake, opportunities for us to go on offense rather than guarding our own basket—and an attentive media.

Over the past 18 months, we've seen an intense focus on USPS and letter carriers as numerous news outlets discovered our essential work. Even post-sheltering at home and post-election it's endured, albeit in more diffuse fashion. We remain on their radar screen over delivery or safety issues, postal legislation or presidential mandates involving federal workers and vaccinations, and more.

So, chances abound for us to get our message out by interacting with journalists. There's also this, though: With numerous reporters possessing scant grounding in the topic out to make a splash—what could possibly go wrong?

Our goal must be to engage, but to engage thoughtfully and stay on message.

You're already familiar with the basics: Be constructive, leave the partisan politics to others, stick to the facts because they're on our side. So, we'll focus here instead on two practical matters that can prove tricky if we're not all in synch.

When a reporter—print, TV, radio—seeks a comment for a story, you may be tempted to immediately offer your opinion. You should, however, resist the impulse. Just say you're in the middle of something and will try to get back to them. Then let me know or, if easier, tell your branch president or someone similar, and they'll inform me.

Why? Because things could be more complex than appears. The issue might be something we're not ready to comment on, there might be no advantage in our wading in, or we might be handling it at the national level. The reporter might have an agenda. The outlet might be untrustworthy.

So, share the query with us, and together we'll decide whether—and how—to respond.

**The second matter is a subset of this; it involves the specific words you use with the reporter, especially if a phone call catches you off guard.**

The phrasing above (you'll try to get back to them) is strategic. It leaves the door open to weighing in while reducing the likelihood that, if you don't, they'll say you refused to comment. Don't ad lib beyond that, as in, you'd love to talk to them but need to check whether you're allowed to.

Again, why? Because there are two kinds of journalists: responsible and irresponsible. You tell the former that you need to check, and if you don't get back to him, no big deal. He moves on. The latter type, though, will be off to the races, spicing up his story with a dash of manufactured conflict: *Letter carrier Mary Smith said she wanted to comment on the issue, but her union muzzled her.*

Or, if to keep yourself out of the story when a reporter unexpectedly calls, you say, "No comment," what you've actually done *is* comment, as in, *Brad Jones refused to comment.* Again, just tell the reporter you'll try to get back to him.

As I've often said, you—from rank-and-file members to branch officers to our national leaders—are our key asset in changing the national discussion and informing the public, pols and press, whether by interacting with reporters or writing letters to the editor. You're respected in your communities, deeply versed in the issues, and invested in assuring that people get the real scoop. The point here is just to avoid unforced errors in the process.

**I couldn't end this column without mentioning the sad** news just minutes ago of the passing of Rich Trumka, AFL-CIO president. I had the honor of knowing Rich for more than three decades, starting with a memorable midnight interview with him in a St. Louis hotel room during his whirlwind national tour to fight for America's coal miners as the young president of the mineworkers' union. He unexpectedly offered me an MRE (Meal, Ready-to-Eat) that a military buddy had brought him from Iraq, leading to some chuckles. I subsequently marveled as Rich developed into one of the great labor leaders in U.S. history. He was a joyous person, a tireless fighter, and an inspiration for workers worldwide. More about Rich next month.

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