

Media: An asymmetric battle



**Philip
Dine**

As discussed last month, we've entered a new day in our communications efforts, tackling issues such as letter carrier safety and staffing shortages. While the topics have shifted, getting the message out remains vital to our union's success.

Today, we'll drill down on what the battle now looks like, how to wage it, and what to watch for. Discipline and vigilance are key—more about that in a minute. First, let's put this in the context of the past dozen years, during which our efforts (better; your efforts) largely focused on postal reform, which required changing the national conversation about USPS finances. If folks believed that postal red ink resulted from the internet's growing impact or that taxpayers fund

the Post Office, reform was a non-starter. Why should people pay—or fight—for a lost cause?

Toward that end, NALC had to show the public and lawmakers that this wasn't a story of postal obsolescence due to society's technological advances (about which little could be done), but instead reflected poor public policy in the form of pre-funding (about which much could be done).

That meant educating uninformed or agenda-driven journalists advancing postal misconceptions. No easy task, but NALC's leaders and rank-and-file members met the challenge.

When the pandemic hit, two new media phases were ushered in. Initially, journalists depicted letter carriers as essential workers delivering goods so millions could shelter at home. The stories didn't involve politics or economics, but rather the value and valor of letter carriers. These were largely general assignment or feature reporters new to the postal beat, aware of how much they didn't know and open to learning. So they needed context and contacts, which we gladly supplied.

Things abruptly shifted as the 2020 election neared, political reporters entered the fray—and coverage of mail voting, USPS and the new postmaster general became intensely politicized. As it turned out, mail ballots were handled so well by letter carriers that news organizations had to acknowledge that reality.

Which brings us to the current media approach to postal matters, which is more random and more unpredictable—because attention has largely shifted from broad national topics like finances, legislative reform, the pandemic and elections to breaking local news, such as criminal attacks on letter carriers or residents' concerns about uneven mail delivery.

The evolving dynamics alter how we deal with the media. It's now less about addressing political agendas or gaps of knowledge across entire media outlets; more about countering the

desire of some reporters to sensationalize events to get better play for their stories. The old journalistic saw—if it bleeds, it leads—poses a mounting threat.

That's not to say that there isn't a national element to these issues. President Renfro and other officers are in continual discussion with USPS about how to protect letter carriers on their routes, and how to address staffing shortages that contribute both to carrier vulnerability (working longer and later) and to delivery snafus.

It is, however, to say that such problems tend to manifest themselves locally, in what resembles asymmetric warfare—involving news outlets here and there or even individual reporters, and unpredictability about where the next episode will arise. While many reporters are conscientious, others aim to stir the pot—asking letter carriers if they should be armed, publicizing arrow keys' black-market value, looking to interview carriers who've been robbed. Imagine the potential headlines.

We need to be vigilant about spotting irresponsible journalism and disciplined about what to do if approached by its purveyors.

In both instances, you should not take it upon yourself to deal impromptu with the media—instead, inform your branch president and/or me, so we can figure out whether, and how, to proceed. What we don't say, the interviews we don't accept, can be just as important to our efforts as where we do engage. (Note—do not tell reporters that you have no comment, or that you need to check. Simply say you're busy and will try to get back to them.)

Thoughtful preparation already has produced notable successes.

In West Palm Beach, FL, Branch 1690 President Jeffrey Wagner's deft parrying of a local TV reporter seeking to focus on arming carriers and to interview a carrier who'd been victimized led to a constructive story in which Jeff termed the rise in robberies "intolerable," emphasized our commitment to carrier safety and urged residents to notify police of anything unusual.

In Charlotte, NC, Branch 545 President Sylvan Stevens' skillful handling of safety issues prompted the TV reporter to tell me, "I learned so much from him, have a better understanding of the job," and to say that he'd like to do other helpful stories moving forward.

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