

Shifting media engagement, stay on course



**Philip
Dine**

Over the past couple of years, we've moved from one vital messaging campaign to a second; initially seeking to protect USPS from the pre-funding mandate that created an unfair financial burden, now to protect letter carriers from an avalanche of robberies and assaults.

Each effort has been daunting in its own way.

What we'll focus on today are the communications hurdles we face in combatting the criminal targeting of letter carriers, and how you can best navigate those challenges.

First, some brief context. The prior communications effort involved informing the public and their reps in Congress about the unique mandate that had the Postal Service constantly

facing red ink. This required that we first educate the media—not always an easy task.

Early on, perhaps a decade ago, I was patiently explaining to a *Washington Post* reporter that it would be unfair to write that the Postal Service had lost hundreds of millions of dollars in a given quarter, because without the pre-funding burden faced by no other entity, USPS actually would have had a sizeable profit.

His sarcastic retort: "Yeah, Phil, and if my old college in Virginia hadn't had to play the first half Saturday, it would have won the basketball game."

Let's just say we had a spirited exchange. (If you're going to use hoops to make an anti-NALC argument, find someone else to try that with.)

Letter carriers eventually won the pre-funding battle, thanks largely to your work informing the public and the pols about postal finances via your thousands of commentary pieces and letters to the editor in newspapers big and small around the country.

The task now before us differs sharply, in two ways.

The persuasion part of the formula is easier. We don't need to convince the media—or anyone else—that attacks on letter carriers are occurring, are a threat, and need to stop. That's all self-evident.

Tougher, though, is the delivery part of the message—for dual reasons.

Rather than crafting our own message on our own time in our own words for stand-alone pieces on the editorial pages, we're now engaging in real time with journalists doing hard-news stories, asking us questions, and deciding what to use.

Moreover, the coverage has largely (though not entirely) shifted from print to broadcast. By its very nature—figures, finances, legislative history—pre-funding wasn't a visual story, so it was largely covered by newspapers, magazines and

wire services. The current issue lends itself to television—attacks on letter carriers, sometimes captured on video; rallies replete with our signs and T-shirts and speeches; on-camera interviews with carriers, including victims. And an interview involving a camera can seem more intimidating than one featuring a note pad (though a probing newspaper reporter can actually be more worrisome than a TV reporter just hoping for a good sound bite).

What does all this mean in practice if you're preparing for an interview about the assaults on letter carriers?

Stay on message, and don't be rattled by the occasional curveball question that might be tossed your way.

The message is simple: These attacks are unacceptable and need to stop, now. They traumatize letter carriers, they hurt residents and businesses, and they diminish the quality of life in the neighborhoods we serve by making it harder for us to be the "eyes and ears" of the community. USPS needs to upgrade its technology, federal prosecutors need to prosecute these cases, the "Protect Our Letter Carriers" legislation needs to be supported, and we appreciate residents having our back and watching out for our safety.

In delivering that message, be on the lookout for the out-of-left field query that has nothing to do with that message but rather aims to generate controversy or attention. Should letter carriers be armed? What are the crooks after? What's a master key worth on the black market? How does check-washing work?

Remember, you're in charge, not the journalist, and you're not obligated to answer a question you don't want to answer. At the same time, as we've frequently noted, don't say you have no comment.

Instead, just ward off the question, in a way that fits best with the nature of the inquiry and/or with your personality. Such as: "That's speculation and I'm not going there." "That's not our decision to make." "Answering that would benefit no one but the bad guys." "There's no value in addressing that." Or, "I'm not here to discuss that."

Remember, these interviews are almost always taped, not live, and a reporter/editor/producer is unlikely to use any question you've effectively dismissed, because it reflects poorly on the outlet.

Any questions, let me know.

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