

Back to basics



**Philip
Dine**

We'll take a break this month from the string of tales about the creativity, dedication and valor of letter carriers—their deeds intriguing and even inspirational—and return to a practical activity of our union. One that is encapsulated in the name of the department that produces this magazine—Communications and Media Relations. An activity that is vital to everything else our union endeavors to do. And, notably, one that letter carriers from NALC Headquarters to regions to branches have excelled in: getting the message out.

Indeed, at all levels, the role you have played, whether national leaders or rank-and-file carriers, is unique in the labor movement in

terms of volume, quality and impact.

Drilling down a bit, the process of getting our word out involves three steps—determining what the precise message is, crafting it to maximum effect, and dealing with that sometimes odd group known as journalists to deliver it to the public and the politicians.

The first of those (defining the message) varies with the times and the issues at hand, and the third (navigating the media) is one you've mastered in impressive fashion. You know the drill, and the extent to which you've changed the national conversation on postal matters makes that clear.

The second rung in the ladder—how we compose our message, i.e., the words and phrases we use, the clarity and brevity (or lack thereof) that flow from them—is an area in which any organization can always find ways to improve.

And one that can yield significant benefits.

How so?

When you present your message concisely and efficiently, you produce a dual benefit. For starters, your message is more clear, easier for folks to grasp, and thus more persuasive, while you also leave more space (or time) to get to the key points because you have dispensed with unnecessary or flowery verbiage.

Secondly, less obvious but just as important, is the heightened credibility you will cultivate among readers or listeners or viewers. If your grammar is impeccable, your organization logical, your words well chosen and your phrasing flawless, the audience will—consciously or subconsciously—find the content of your argument more convincing. They might not be subject experts in the postal topics you're discussing (pre-funding, privatization...), but if they are impressed by how you construct the message, they're more likely to con-

clude that on the details and nuances of the issue at hand, you probably know what you're talking about.

We're focusing here, to be clear, on theory and process, and haven't cited concrete examples of how to craft the message in ways that are concise and effective and persuasive.

Two reasons for that: In the limited space left, we could scarcely do justice on that score, plus I'd ask you to initially ponder the matter on your own. Look at what you write, turn the printout sideways and this way and that and analyze what you could leave out, what you could say in fewer words, how you could meld a couple of paragraphs into a single one to save space and sharpen the point, which sentences might be redundant and merit deletion.

We'll revisit the topic with examples moving forward.

But for now, I'll shift gears and turn to how you might consider reacting (given the chance) to a reporter who's done a news story you find excellent, or to one whose article completely misses the mark. The natural instinct might be to lavish praise on the first reporter and to lash out at the second.

Neither approach would be optimal.

You tell a journalist that you loved her story, and the way she'll interpret it is that she was too favorable to the letter carrier perspective—and therefore should compensate the next time she addresses a postal issue. Better to tell her something like this: You found it balanced and informative, and that while you didn't agree with everything in the story, it was well written and fair. She'll take *that* to mean she's on the right track.

Conversely, to a reporter whose story totally misrepresented the situation or was one-sided, you tell him that and he'll tune you out (in case you haven't noticed, many journalists are either thin-skinned or full of themselves, and don't take criticism well). Instead, tell him what you liked (there's got to be something...) before adding, "On the other hand, there were a few aspects that you might want to re-examine the next time around. Do you mind if I briefly mention them?"

In both instances, you just might forge a constructive relationship moving forward.

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The Postal Record (ISSN 0032-5376) is published monthly by the National Association of Letter Carriers. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Membership Department, NALC, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144.

Subscription included in membership dues. First-class subscription available for \$20 per year (contact Membership Department).

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Circulation: 287,000. Union-printed using soy-based inks.

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