

What you do is why you're respected



Philip
Dine

On a Monday in early October, I was teaching a Leadership Academy class on dealing with the media. The letter carriers had just divided up into four groups, retreated to separate classrooms to spend 15 minutes writing a letter to the editor that told our story, and returned to read their letters to the entire class for reaction.

Each group accurately and succinctly (two paragraphs tops) challenged the conventional wisdom too often presented as fact—that the U.S. Postal Service is losing billions of dollars a quarter delivering the mail because everyone's on the Internet, taxpayers are on the hook for this, so sharp cuts in service are needed.

All of that is wrong, and in various ways each letter corrected the false narrative and provided key information—about increasing revenue, the upside of the Internet, the \$300 million operating profit so far this year or the role of the congressional pre-funding mandate in generating red ink.

Fine, I told the group, we've now outlined the actual financial situation at USPS, and filled our space in so doing. But what if we were to write an op-ed or commentary piece and had 750 words instead of 250? Then we could add a key element: why people should care; why it matters that the postal network survive intact.

We quickly developed three themes: 1) The world's most affordable and efficient delivery service is critical for businesses and residents alike; 2) USPS is the centerpiece of a \$1.3 trillion national mailing industry that employs 7.5 million Americans in the private sector; 3) the nation's only universal delivery network benefits our society in ways far beyond the economic impact.

This latter is a powerful arrow in our quiver, because it captures the attention of reporters and resonates with the public. It's a great way to end a commentary piece; after showing readers why the USPS has a good future financially if Congress addresses the damage it's done, we close by telling folks about the broader value to them and their communities of this unique network. Whether the food drive or the Carrier Alert program, the Cities' Readiness Initiative or the way letter carriers look out for their customers on a daily basis, the impression left is highly positive.

This was driven home just four days after the Leadership Academy class, at the 2013 Heroes luncheon in Washington.

The stories are always compelling, the heroes inevitably self-effacing, President Rolando invariably a blend of eloquence and humor—but this year's event was particularly uplifting and deeply moving.

Why? Because of what our heroes did—and how they spoke in their brief remarks about why they acted. The fact that three of the six individual winners were military veterans added another aspect.

To be clear, what these men and women did was not aimed at garnering positive publicity or at advancing our cause, any more than what so many letter carriers do on a daily basis has any goal other than protecting and assisting our customers and bettering the communities we serve.

You save people on the route because you're letter carriers and it's part of what you stand for when you put on the uniform. But we shouldn't ignore how much this helps get the message out as we battle conventional wisdom, uninformed folks and some determined ideological foes to preserve the U.S. Postal Service.

What you do enhances the favorable way you're viewed by the public and the respect lawmakers have for us, while providing journalists with good stories and with tangible proof of the value to real people of USPS and of letter carriers. It offers another dimension to our narrative about the Postal Service's continuing relevance.

And so, within a day of the Heroes event, the same week as we discussed getting the message out via the media—millions of readers and viewers were informed about the often-heroic nature of letter carriers by three of the four largest newspapers in Texas, the *Miami Herald*, Cleveland's Fox TV station—and dozens of other outlets across the nation. The headlines typically contained words like "honored" and "heroism."

The way you come to the aid of people, without hesitation and often with courage, is just another way you show the public, day in and day out, how the Postal Service and the letter carrier craft are as indispensable today as when first led by Benjamin Franklin two centuries ago.

EDITORIAL STAFF:
Managing Editor Philip Dine
Designer/Web Editor Mike Shea
Internet Communications Coordinator
Joe Conway
Writer/Editor Rick Hodges
Editorial Assistant Jenessa Kildall

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