

Helping the media do their job



**Philip
Dine**

We've often discussed getting letter carrier voices directly into the media mix, whether through commentaries you do for newspapers or by television or radio interviews.

Your efforts are reflected in the links and clips that regularly fill our website's "Postal Facts" section. Your contributions cover so many media outlets and such varied forums—letters to the editor, commentary pieces, interviews for news stories or features, TV interviews, radio discussions, and more—that you keep "Postal Facts" resembling a busy, energized newsroom.

And your message through all this is highly disciplined—the value of the Postal Service, its actual financial situation, the need to maintain and strengthen its unique delivery network, the best way to preserve the Postal Service and protect the public.

Meanwhile, there are other ways to use the media to influence the public—and their representatives—that take less time and don't involve your being in print or in front of a TV camera. Yet they can be highly productive in getting our message out and in shaping media behavior.

Here are a couple of approaches that are simple—but effective.

When you see a misleading or inaccurate statement written about the Postal Service, let the paper know. Why? They may do a correction or clarification. They will learn something they didn't know. They'll be more careful next time writing about postal issues (or running a wire story without checking it). They may even do a story based on what you told them—because, obviously, it's the opposite of what they thought. And they may ask how to reach you or your branch next time they report on postal issues.

All this, potentially, for a few minutes of effort—carried out good-naturedly, of course!—on your part.

Keep in mind, this works best when it's a factual error, not a matter of opinion. For example, if a reporter says in a story that taxpayers fund the USPS—that's a factual error that can easily be shown to be false. But if a story editorializes that the Postal Service should go to five-day delivery—well, that's a matter of opinion and you're likely to get into a debate. (In such an instance, a letter to the editor or op-ed piece work better.)

Whom to contact at the paper depends on the type of

piece. If it's a news story, call a city desk editor. If it's a business story, call the business editor. An editorial or commentary piece, call the editorial page editor. If you're unsure, or want to discuss how to prove they're wrong, feel free to give me a holler.

Example: Montana Public Radio ran in April a commentary that praised the Postal Service, but the commentator unfortunately said she didn't mind her taxes going for USPS. We called her to explain the finances, and in short order the station had deleted the offending paragraph and posted new text reading in part:

...I believe millions of US citizens are laboring under the same misconception as I was: that the USPS is draining taxpayer money. That idea is patently false: the USPS is totally self-sufficient, depending upon the sale of stamps and services to fund its operation. Not one dime of taxpayer money goes to the USPS...The fly in this very fine ointment is a law that was passed by the 2006 lame-duck Congress: the USPS is required to pre-fund its retiree health benefits for 75 years into the future and pay for it within ten years...

Suggest a story idea. Someone at your branch has just heroically saved a customer. An Afghanistan or Iraq war vet has hired on as a letter carrier and he'd make a great interview. You know businesses or households that rely on Saturday mail delivery and would discuss it. A new USPS quarterly report shows a continued operating profit. Your branch is actively preparing for the food drive. Call an editor or a reporter at the local paper (whether a small weekly or large metro daily) or alert a TV or radio news department, and tell them you have a story that would resonate with their audience.

Journalists are just like anyone else—they don't mind their jobs being made easier by someone handing them a good story and perhaps offering to help. Your brief effort here could turn into a Page 1 story or a broadcast story that could make you, your branch, and all of us, proud indeed—while helping our cause.

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