

## No comment



**Philip Dine**

**A decision not to comment** when a reporter asks us to discuss a given topic can be a valuable tool in our communications arsenal. Yet, “no comment” is a fraught phrase that risks defeating the very goal we have in mind.

While declining to comment can be the right thing to do in certain circumstances, wording it that way is always the wrong thing to do. You say “no comment” to a reporter intent on sensationalizing a story or making us look bad, and you’ve just given him all the ammo he needs.

The matter of when—and how—to avoid engaging with a journalist is such a key part of dealing with the media that it merits close examination—especially at a time when rank-

and-file letter carriers and branch presidents, national business agents and Headquarters officers are besieged with inquiries from news outlets.

### First, some context.

Journalistic interest in letter carriers rose in recent years as we made news on various fronts: bringing essential items to sheltering residents, delivering a record number of mail ballots in the 2020 presidential election, helping push historic postal reform through Congress last year. From a media perspective, the pandemic, election and legislation were national issues and so were chiefly covered by reporters assigned to such beats as politics or Congress or economics, and intent on talking to our national leaders.

The past few months, media attention to letter carriers has widened—and changed in nature—as we confront the twin safety perils of heat and crime. A heat wave and a crime surge are less Washington-centric. They affect every community, every household and, therefore, pique the interest of local, regional and national news outlets, which in turn assign what are known as general assignment reporters, or GAs.

So, we now are dealing with hundreds of reporters throughout the country, possessing varying levels of experience, information and skill. While the main challenge previously involved journalists with political agendas, on topics like heat and crime we risk facing attempts to draw attention via sensationalism, even if it incentivizes the bad guys and endangers carriers by stories that focus, for example, on the black-market value of arrow keys.

Further, reporters covering the local impact of heat and crime, while still interested in our national perspective, often seek out local carriers directly affected by these phenomena—aiming to satisfy editors’/producers’ instructions to humanize the stories by featuring RPs (journalese for real people).

In this environment, we need to communicate forcefully, but smartly—which brings us to the nitty-gritty.

**If a reporter approaches you or calls you, do not comment,** but also do not refuse to comment. Instead, simply tell him you’re in the middle of something and will try to get back to him. Then let me know. If he emailed you a query, simply forward it to me. (If easier for you, get the information to your branch president or NBA.)

The reason to avoid “no comment” is that in fact you’ve just commented; the subsequent story might say, “Asked how letter carriers are coping with the heat, Jim Smith refused to comment”—suggesting indifference to carriers’ well-being. And don’t elaborate or ad lib, as in “I have to check whether I can comment”—because if the reporter doesn’t hear back, he might feel emboldened to write that Jim Smith was willing to speak but had been muzzled.

This is no time to freelance. It bears mention that almost all of you are following these steps.

Before engaging, we need to evaluate the reporter, the outlet, the story. I’ll talk with them to assess their postal knowledge, disabuse them of any misconceptions, figure out whether they’re likely to seek self-aggrandizement and perhaps put a target on the backs of letter carriers, and judge whether they’re grounded in journalistic ethics and practices.

If they seem inept, irresponsible or unethical, it’s a non-starter. In that case, I won’t tell them that we have no comment (smile...) but instead that we couldn’t find someone to interview on short notice. Or, perhaps, that if the reporter agrees to eliminate the detail about washing stolen checks, we might reconsider.

If doing the interview makes sense—and in most cases it does—and you’d like to do it, we’ll discuss the best message and tone. These conversations are often brief because so many of you are both well versed in the issues and adept at dealing with journalists.

**This column would be incomplete without saluting you** for your outstanding work helping NALC get our message out on matters that affect the livelihood—even the lives—of letter carriers. As always, when it matters most, you are delivering.

**EDITORIAL STAFF:**  
 Director of Communications and Media Relations Philip Dine  
 Managing Editor Mike Shea  
 Writer/Editor Rick Hodges  
 Writer/Editor Jenessa Wagner  
 Editorial Assistant Joelle Dine

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