

SENSEMAKING: WHAT IS OUR PROFESSION SELLING?

By Paul Abels, Ph.D. with comments by Chauncey Alexander, M.S.W.

We were reminiscing the other day, Chauncey Alexander and I, about the good old days of social work. Chauncey was the Executive Director of NASW for 15 years, and introduced a number of important ideas into the organization. Well, anyway, as old timers are used to doing, we talked about some of the current policies that were about to add more sorrow to poor of our country. You know how we social workers often carry "the weight of the world" on our shoulders, and talk social justice at the drop of a hat or cap (nowadays). He mentioned that the last copy of the National NASW news had some good stuff in it. I stared at him oddly, and of course he knew what was on my mind because we had discussed the issue a few times before.

"Did you count the number of pages of ads?" I asked? "There were 11 pages of ads in a 20 page newspaper. That's a little over 50%. You must admit that there is something wrong if we can't find enough issues to deal with that we end up with more ads than news. And I'm not even counting the pictures, which may be important but don't add much to bringing about social change," I added with my usual sarcasm. In reality, I don't mind the job ads, because that is a valuable contribution, but that other stuff is just "business." I knew I had him in a tough spot, because there isn't another person I know who is so dedicated to NASW and our profession. "Yes", he admitted, "its true." I spared him the discomfort of further discussion on this particular subject, but this is the way I see it.

Ad counting? You would be right to say "Who cares, there is much more important stuff for our profession to worry about," and

I certainly agree. But that's my point! The ads are just a metaphor for our profession's changing priorities. My not-very-scientific-study indicates that for about two years now, the ads are taking up more and more room as our social problems are becoming more and more severe. The last couple of year's issues are about 50% ads. Two years ago, the Oct. 2001 California NASW news had 11 pages of ads out of 28 pages, about 40%, and an article about 9/11. Perhaps things were going to improve.

Does a crises make much difference? The national NASW News: Oct. 2001, headline: "NASW Responds to Terror Attacks." Ads - 65%. Perhaps they didn't have enough time to write more because of their early deadline? The next month, Nov. 2001, headline: "Social Workers Heed Call After Attacks." Ads - 57%. Let me say at this point that since ads are social constructions, other counters might not see ads as I did, and may get a different count.

Okay - enough statistics. I believe that a newspaper is supposed to have its major purpose to inform, but commercial newspapers count on ads for economic survival. Some people enjoy reading ads. Woody Allen once joked about reading the Sunday paper because of the lingerie ads. I can appreciate that, but in a professional newsletter, providing information about the profession should be its major purpose. (Trumpets sound a fanfare).

I did not intend to count ads - it was a fluke. I was disturbingly interested in the speedy growth of businesses aimed at preparing people to pass their exams for California licensing and to acquire CEUs to maintain their license. I have found the ads

varied and fun, but crowding out the news I believed was important for us to know about. Then I began to see that the California NASW was getting into the business on a large scale. The current June issue includes three pages related to home study courses and a "CE Fair" (see, I told you it was fun). In fact, the last State conference was almost all related to taking courses for licensing credit. I am not sure if there was even a keynote speaker, and I think the luncheon speaker was a magician or something. Two full days of courses.

Now I am not against courses; I have been teaching them for over forty years. But I always thought a major function of a professional conference was to share ideas, and to have a keynote speaker who frames the issues and sparks us on to greater efforts. Well, at least that's what it used to be like, but not so this time around. Maybe next year.

In all fairness to the California and national NASW News editors, there may not be all that much news for social workers to get excited about. Let's see.... In California how about the lack of Foster Homes for kids? Old hat (or cap).... Financial misconduct by agencies that are supposed to be overseeing Foster Care Homes, but used the money for cars and trips to the tropics?... Too legal for us to understand the nuances. Thirty percent of children in California in poverty? So what's new?... Unemployment rate in California of 6.7%? Could be worse.... Increased tuition of 30% for state college students; closing Junior college programs.... The educators should deal with that. There was a major push for "title protection." A good idea which I would support if social workers would agree not to call themselves therapists.

Okay, so there aren't issues for us to deal with in California, how about the national picture?

Let's see...the homeless? That's a problem for HUD.... Cuts in education? None of the programs work anyway.... What about attacks on Head Start? Fuzzy research,

and the states could do it better.... Many states revealing deaths and abuse in Foster Care? Well, the *N. Y. Times* covers that stuff, what could we add? Maybe there just aren't any problems left for us to be informed about and organized to help change.

But let's get back to the real problem: the ads issues. NASW has joined the CE business. Is it a service we need, or is it a fundraiser? I appreciate their book publishing business, because it can fill the gaps that other publishers might avoid. But are they better teachers than some of their competitors? Are they more sensitive to how people learn? What is NASW's expertise? Just what should they be selling? Now there is an interesting question (I think). Someone else might ask where is the money going? Have we done more "good" with it?

At this point you might suggest that I just ignore reading the ad pages. Well, I want my money's worth. I paid for 20 pages and I want 20 pages, and besides, just in case you don't read the NASW news, it isn't that there isn't anything to be learned by looking at the ads. I must admit I learned a lot. For example, a lot of social work practice is related to body parts. I can earn CEUs by studying practice on the whole person, eye movements, the palm, the heart, the balanced brain (I am not sure where to fit in the soul).

Social workers can broaden their horizons as well as their multicultural understanding through travel. I can earn CEU's by going to Cape Cod, taking a sea voyage, a trip to Hawaii, or Alaska. One might assume that the return trip would provide the social workers in Hawaii and Alaska for credits for courses in California. Makes sense to me. If you get sea sick, or need to recover at home from burnout or overcome stress you can get credits while watching TV or reading a journal article. One ad shows a person lying in a hammock listening to a tape for his CEU's. Now that's for me. Oh, by the way,

would you hand me my "True Social Work" comics?

Makes sense to me.

(For the sake of fairness I have asked Chauncey to comment on the above).

Chauncey Alexander

Paul Abels has a great ability to analyze problems and issues in social work policies. We "Old Timers" are conditioned to habitually examine those social work programs for their utility and "talk about social justice at the drop of a hat."

However, when Paul enunciated his "ads versus news" theory for the *NASW News*, it set off the four-alarm fire signal in my head. As the NASW Executive Director for about 13 years, I knew the financial and copy problems that the news staff wrestled with regularly and admired their commitment to professionalism standards and to the NASW members. I was also used to the content analysis techniques of the newspaper industry.

To be certain, I checked the June and July issues of the *NASW News*. Paul was correct for his general position. The June issue had 11 out of 20 pages that we would label as "news," the rest being ads. But nine out of that eleven I would label as "community organization" or "political".

The July issue had 9 out of 20 pages of "news" that Paul had differentiated from "ads". But eight out of those nine pages were write-ups of community organization or political news. Consequently, I was correct in recognizing the news articles, after a finer analysis of them, as being related to the business of the Association: community organization, political action, professional and public education.

Hooray! I hope we cleared up that difference! Oh, yes, there is another worthwhile clarification. The content of the *NASW News* is also related to the time of the year of publication. Paul's examples are taken

during the time of the annual Fair; educational events were paramount in that month. A more equitable analysis could be gained by study of a year's publications.

Let's get back to the ad business, as Paul says. Obviously, ads are serving a purpose by making special areas of knowledge available to practitioners. They don't compete with the action components of the profession. Ads are part of the professional education responsibility of the profession: to make known the availability of necessary knowledge. And they have the advantage, if done properly, of convincing the practitioner of the importance and necessity for professional action.

With the Bush administration in control, it's easy to pick an issue that needs attention. He is cleverly pushing programs of the right-wing, global corporation, and anti-poor, health, environmental, organizations. So, the problem is not the "ads versus the news." Give us more news, which has as its purpose defending our organization against the anti-social, anti-welfare, anti-civil liberties programs now underway. Give us more pages!!!

That makes sense to me.

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