



Straight-talker Eric Karjaluo addresses mom-and-pop shops in his inaugural tome, *Speak Human*

## Who is Eric Karjaluo?

Social media aficionado pens first book, a how-to on marketing for SMEs

**VANCOUVER-BASED** designer Eric Karjaluo – “Karj” for those not fluent in the Finnish tongue – is the cofounder and creative director of digital design firm smashLAB. As a frequent blogger and Tweeter – he has 2,200 followers – this social-media junkie has an omnipresent online presence. Yet his latest project is an old-fashioned paperback titled *Speak Human*.

“It would be really painful to read 100,000 words on a blog,” he notes. “The fact that people can hold it in their hands...changes their engagement with it.”

Having his feet in both the old and new media worlds is typical of his work. The married father of two young boys grew up in Prince George, a logging town in the B.C. interior. After studying at Vancouver’s Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Karjaluo painted by day while working in newspaper production all night. “You can only do that for so long before you’re not connecting with any humans,” he says of that time in his life. So he reconnected with an old friend from Prince George, computer-whiz Eric Shelke.

“We started talking about how people were making a

ton of money making websites. ‘Why don’t we go and do that?’” So in May 2000, they launched smashLAB just as the first dot-com bubble was bursting. “It was perfectly timed,” he jokes.

They survived that recession and, after moving to Vancouver three years later, they haven’t looked back. Their client list ranges from local businesses, such as Tourism Vancouver and Crescent Spur Heli Skiing, to multinational corporations, including CN and the New York-based Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. They’ve also been recognized with honours and accolades from the likes of Vancouver’s Lotus Awards and *Time* magazine.

And while smashLAB may have launched as a web design firm with fairly small-scale clients, over the years it has evolved into a strategic branding agency of various media. Helping clients think strategically ultimately lead to *Speak Human*.

In fact, the book is targeted at smaller “mom-and-pop shops,” many of which can’t afford to hire smashLAB, yet need design help the most, admits Karjaluo. “If

their signage were different or they spelled their service correctly they would immediately get more people coming in. There are so many of these small organizations that only need to tweak a few things to make a drastic difference in what they do.”

Think of it as a guidebook to helping small businesses recognize their strengths and avoid the pitfalls of simply trying to emulate the big players on the cheap. As he writes in the preface, “Ultimately, this book is about finding your own voice, articulating it clearly, and using it to connect with your customers... All you have to do is *Speak Human*.”

Karjaluo has never had a problem finding his own voice or articulating his point of view. On his blog, ideasonideas – which gets up to 50,000 unique visitors a month – Karjaluo has been known to be vocal about his criticisms of the marketplace. He admits concern over the “strange” dichotomy the industry is facing. While the general public has a greater awareness of the role of design, there’s a one-two punch from overseas discount design firms and various spec work schemes (see, “Standing firm, no re: spec,” Sept/Oct 2009) driving down the perceived value of design.

And when Karjaluo gets really heated, he doesn’t mince his words. A posting that dissed self-promotional wunderkind Tim Ferriss for crowdsourcing the design of his own book cover ran under the heading, “Is Tim Ferriss Acting Like an Asshole?” (Karjaluo’s conclusion: yes.)

Yet the feedback he gets for his opinions – Tim Ferriss obviously excluded – is generally positive, from a loyal audience. A snapshot of comments from a recent post on the difficulty of hiring quality staff includes “As usual, a down-to-earth viewpoint” and “This is a really thoughtful post, thanks. My senior design students will be hearing about it!”

Karjaluo hopes his first book is as well received. “My hope is if a small-business person, regardless of what industry they’re in, reads this book and no other marketing book, it would be a primer that led them towards a big-picture way of looking at their marketing and how they can make their company stand out.”

Of course, all these distractions can get in the way of paid work, a key focus for the near future. “Now that the book’s finished our focus is going to be back in to building the agency,” says Karjaluo. No doubt the tools used in that building process will vary from pen on paper to the latest technology he can get his hands on.

– Allan Britnell