



The GPS Girl:

Helping Us Find Our Way

Australian voice-over artist leads from the driver's seat.

BY CRAIG HARRISON, DTM

Her voice is in 100 million GPS (Global Positioning System) units worldwide, including Garmin, TomTom, Navman and Mio products. You've likely been in cars and elevators and on hold with her ... and some of you have cursed her when lost, or professed your love for her for helping you navigate your route.

Karen Jacobsen—known as the GPS Girl—is the woman behind the voice. She is also heard in automated voice systems for telephones, elevators and

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hotels. Besides being a voice-over artist, she is a speaker, singer and songwriter.

Currently a New York City resident, Jacobsen grew up in Mackay, Queensland, Australia (where she idolized the Australian singer and actress Olivia Newton-John). She began singing at age 7 and completed a Toastmasters Youth Leadership program in high school.

Success hasn't come easy to Jacobsen: She spent years battling stage fright. But these days she sings and speaks to large audiences ... and provides directions to millions of people around the world.

Q: How did you become the universal voice for GPS navigators?

A: Would you believe it was through an audition? A couple of years ago I received a call out of the blue from an agent whose client was looking for a native Australian female voice-over artist living in the northeastern United States. I thought, *That job is mine!*

I went to downtown New York City to audition. The client was creating a text-to-speech system and said it would take about 50 hours to do the recording. I read a few sentences in a very calm and consistent Australian accent and tone. They [the people running the audition] gave me a little direction and I read a few more lines. They said, “That is wonderful—our people will book you.” I got the job on the spot. It was an amazing thing.

What were the recording sessions like?

The client had me record a maximum of four hours a day to allow my voice to sound calm and consistent and avoid fatigue. For three weeks I recorded from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

What do people say to you when they recognize your voice as the same one they hear on their GPS?

I have had hundreds of experiences of people wanting to tell me their GPS stories. They are very familiar with me, because to them I represent a real driving companion. They feel they are, or have been, in a relationship with me!

I have people apologize for yelling at me, apologize for cursing me. One woman apologized for strangling me when the GPS cable got caught on the steering wheel as she tried putting the GPS device on the windshield.

One doctor thought I was a former patient based on my voice. A friend from Australia “bought me” (through the GPS system) as a Christmas gift for her husband. Other friends I ride with wanted me to give live directions from their car's back seat to compare them to “Australian Karen's” vocal stylings from the front seat.

One time I was in an elevator with my family at the airport in Brisbane [Australia] and was told, over the public address system, what floor I was on—in my own voice! My father said, “Karen, that was you, wasn't it?!”

Have you always had a poised presence? Are you a natural?

Not at all. As a child, and into adulthood, I was extremely anxious and fearful. To be



Karen Jacobsen, known to commuters for her voice in GPS systems, is a singer and songwriter who also delivers speeches at conferences and other major events.

frank, I had to overcome chronic anxiety to become somebody who could be in front of people or in the studio without panicking. I worked through this for decades.

How did fellow Aussie Olivia Newton-John influence you?

When I was 7, I saw this blonde Australian singer on TV who had moved to America. She had become so successful and she loved the U.S. I wanted to be just like her. She had an amazing impact on me.

A few years ago I was invited to a black-tie gala where Olivia Newton-John was to perform and be honored. My husband and I were told that we would sit at Olivia's table.

At the gala we saw her seated, surrounded by people. We were escorted through the crowd and were suddenly face-to-face with Olivia Newton-John. I was awestruck. I gushed, "Oh! I just really want to acknowledge and thank you for being such an inspiration on all the major decisions of my life, from what I do to where I live." She said, "What a lovely thing to say. What is your name?" I said, "I am Karen Jacobsen," and she said—and I kid you not—"You are Karen Jacobsen? I love your CD!"

How do you get comfortable when performing onstage?

I try to remember to focus on the people I perform for. Whether it's a singing



Jacobsen provides directions to drivers from GPS units in automobiles throughout the world.

performance or a speech, if I start to feel nervous I make a point of remembering that I will only be anxious if I focus on myself. When I am focused on the audience, I am not nervous.

When you aren't doing voice-over work, what else are you involved in?

I remain active as a singer. My eighth music CD was released last March. I recently published a book, *The GPS Girl's Road Map for Your Future*, and I divide my time between singing at public events and for corporate clients. I've maintained my "GPS Girl" brand across my different offerings: concerts, speaking presentations and songwriting. I help people recalculate, give them direction and show them how to create the road map for their life. **T**

Learn more about Karen Jacobsen at www.thegpsgirl.com.

CRAIG HARRISON, DTM, PDG, is a professional speaker and co-founder of the LaughLovers Comedy club in Oakland, California, and the founding chairman of the National Speakers Association's Storytellers Professional Emphasis Group. Learn more about him at www.SpeakAndLeadWithConfidence.com.