

# CRAIN'S CLEVELAND BUSINESS

Former Progressive marketing chief  
Jeff Charney launches a new venture:  
**MKHSTRY**



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Jeff Charney wants to reshape the future of marketing and advertising with a new venture called [MKHSTRY](#).

Charney, who in January retired as chief marketing officer of Progressive Corp. (NYSE: PGR), a position he had held since 2010, on Wednesday morning, March 30, announced the launch of MKHSTRY — aimed at making history, if you weren't picking up on that — which he describes as a "disruptive marketing industry collective that will work with brave corporate and agency leaders to modernize existing, pre-pandemic marketing and advertising models to produce breakthrough results in today's remote working environment."

MKHSTRY itself is a virtual startup that Charney will pilot from his home in Rocky River, "eliminating the heavy overhead normally associated with a traditional agency or consultancy," according to a [news release](#).

## **Goal: disruption**

Charney talks the language of the disrupter economy and says MKHSTRY will work with clients and agencies to modernize "aging traditional business models, helping them adapt to the new creator economy, blockchain, Web3 and Metaverse worlds." On its website, the collective sets lofty goals, noting,

*"Uber disrupted transportation. Netflix disrupted entertainment. Venmo disrupted financial services. ... MKHSTRY arrives to disrupt the 153-year-old, nearly \$300 billion advertising and marketing industry."*

(Go [here](#) for the collective's overview of how Charney says MKHSTRY differs from "today's existing ad agency/marketing consultancy models.")

He said the nationwide collective will work with clients on an invitation-only basis. It will bring on partners to serve clients on an as-needed basis rather than have full-time employees. MKHSTRY will

use a proprietary index — a 75-question pre-screening tool — to identify potential clients that are the best fit, Charney said. He said the MKHSTRY Index will serve as a "bravery barometer" between the collective and potential clients.

*He allows that MKHSTRY is "not for the faint of heart" and called it "a 360-degree, holistic, model-changing approach that's exciting for the right folks and daunting for those less open to change."*

Rather than focus on a campaign-by-campaign advertising model, Charney wants MKHSTRY to be "an accelerator and partner for code-cracking creative ideas."

Charney said a portion of MKHSTRY's profits will go to Little Free Library, a nonprofit that brings books to communities nationwide through small, personalized, pop-up libraries. The company later this year plans to launch a "purpose-driven apparel line — a hybrid of comfort and fashion designed for the remote work environment."

One firm that expects to partner with MKHSTRY is Cleveland-based innovation lab [Nottingham Spirk](#).

It's a collaboration that makes sense, as Nottingham Spirk describes its purpose as being to help "corporate innovators grow their businesses by partnering with them from design to delivery, to create remarkable product innovations."

Founder John Nottingham said he has "known (Charney) for decades" and believes "he's going to do exciting things" with MKHSTRY.

*"He has a lot of energy and a track record," Nottingham said. "We're talking about a lot of opportunities. ... There's a lot of interest. He's aware of our 95% successful rate of commercialization of innovations."*

Nottingham said it's too early to determine exactly what form collaborations between MKHSTRY and Nottingham Spirk might take. ("Stay tuned," he noted.) But he said Charney understands how the pandemic "has really changed the game. ... (Innovation) is not going to be the same as it was before."

## **Busy career**

In March 2021, Charney [announced](#) he would leave Progressive, where he and the marketing team created one of the most iconic characters in advertising history, "Flo," as well as a newly popular figure, parental-life coach "Dr. Rick," and a campaign with the FirstEnergy Stadium-dwelling Baker Mayfield. (Probably best not to have to deal with that one now.) Progressive last fall [named](#) Remi Kent, who had been global marketing chief at the Consumer Business Group of 3M Co. (NYSE: MMM), to succeed Charney as chief marketing officer, effective Nov. 1, 2021.

Before joining Progressive, Charney served as CMO at insurer AFLAC, retailer QVC and real estate aggregator Homestore.com (now Move.com), among other senior-level corporate marketing posts.

Charney in 2021 was named "Brand CMO of the Year" by Advertising Age, a sister publication of Crain's Cleveland Business. He holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of South Carolina, where he serves on the dean's advisory board for the College of Information and Communications. Charney received a master's degree in journalism from Ohio State University.