PRETTY IN PINK



Charles Golding spends work and family time with Poleg's Property Phenomenon, Maxine Marks.

It's the first time I've done an interview in someone's back garden, amidst flamingos, umbrellas and a letterbox. It's also my first time a sixty minute interview was interrupted by a dozen combinations of phone calls, texts, and visits from a son, a daughter, a granddaughter, not to mention husband and office manager. But then, it was my first time meeting the pink panther of Poleg – a human dynamo known as Maxine Marks.



Maxine smiles at me, over a cup of coffee. It's early Sunday morning and the start of the week, here in Israel. "Welcome to my garden" she says. I ask if everything is pink in her place? "I love the colour. It's a strong colour and I believe only strong people wear it". Maxine's company has a fleet of pink cars-with matching pink bags and coffee cups. "I don't make my husband or children wear pink. They wear pink because they want to!" she beams.

I switch on my recorder while she takes a call, leaves the garden momentarily, and comes back with her signature smile. "Sorry" she says "I should pretend this doesn't happen often, but it does. We have two signings today, and there some issues with the first one".

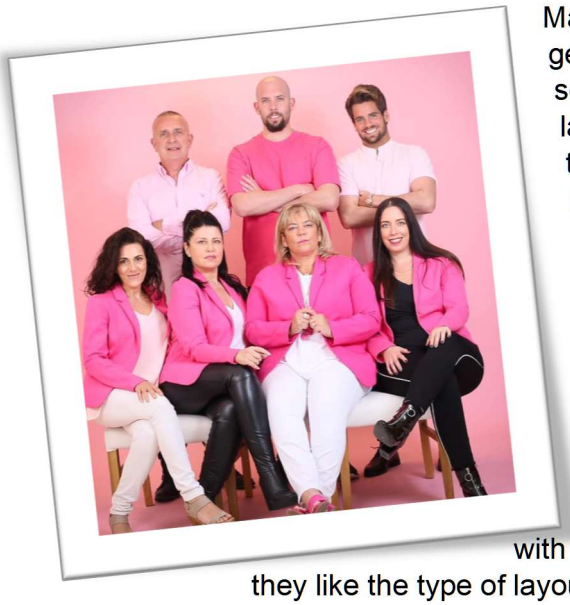
Maxine Marks-Luxury Properties in Israel-is a successful Netanya-based real estate company. This year it's celebrating its fifth anniversary; no mean feat for any start-up when times are normal. But add that to the corona virus pandemic, with restrictions on travel, tourism and trade, unemployment and the uncertainty, it's a phenomenal achievement.

Last month Israel's Ministry of Finance's Chief Economist, reported that housing sales had hit a 20-year-high in 2020. There were 107,100 deals, with more than half of those in the last six months. Globes further reported that the government's cut in purchase tax on owning more than one home was one of the incentives which drew investors back into the market. And with government forecasts predicting the boom to continue throughout 2021, they're expecting a price rise of between 3% - 4%.



So, did the advent of lockdowns, limited travel and a tightening of financial belts affect her company adversely? "Not really" says Maxine "COVID-19 has been the most interesting time for us, because over the last six months we have sold more properties than we did the entire year before. And very expensive properties too. People know what they want and since COVID-19, we have cut out the people who are just messing around and don't really want to buy. In my business you can show 90% of people properties but only 10% will buy".

"Of course you never really know who the buyers are, so you give everyone the same service and spend the same time. But right now there are many more serious buyers on the market, people who really want to buy something special".



Maxine's eyes sparkle and she can barely contain her genuine enthusiasm. Her phone goes. "Back in a minute, sorry about this, it's this morning's signing!". Two minutes later she's back again, explaining that a lot of her job is trying to get *consensus ad idem* between the lawyers representing the buyers and the sellers. "I'll tell you more about that in a minute, now where was I?".

I remind her we were talking about COVID-19 and its effects on the market. Maxine highlights the changes it's made to the way properties are shown. "What we do now is use WhatsApp video live-or FaceTime-and we walk the people around the property. I've sold high-value properties, luxury homes, using this method over the last year. The first time they walk with you is really just to get an idea if they like the property. If they like the type of layout, the design and the 'feel'. It's really only the second time I go into detail and show them specifics; the kitchen cupboards, every window, all the rooms. I don't expect people to understand everything on just one showing".

So what's Maxine's secret of success? She has a definite philosophy. "The most important thing with me is that I don't stress people. They have no pressure. I say to them that as long as they stay with me, I don't care whether they buy now or in six months-I'm going nowhere".

Whichever country you're in, the real estate expression "Location. Location. Location." still rings true and for Maxine, who made aliyah 32 years ago, words like local and community hold a special importance. "The right price in the right location, and perfect for the clients needs', that's important to me. But you have to know the area. I live here and this is my home. My three children were brought up here, so I have a pretty good grasp of the community. You have to know the schools and the shuls, the shops and the government offices-everything in your area. I was offered work in Herzliya and Caesarea, but I declined. If someone is buying a property they really need to know that I know my job".



Her daughter Gabriella arrives, bringing her daughter Mika. Maxine's husband Robert, who's been working in the office, comes to say hello, as does one of their sons, Daniel. Introductions are made as well as toast and more coffee. Granddaughter and grandfather shooting one direction, pregnant daughter in another, while son hands Maxine the iPhone. "It's the lawyers again, I'll be back in two seconds" says Maxine and exits stage left, while I sit enjoying the 24° sunshine in February, welcome to Israel indeed.

"I love working with my family" she says, on returning. I ask if that's difficult at times-does she have to be an amateur psychologist? "Forget the *amateur*!" she smiles, "I love working and my colleagues are also my family, which is a bonus. A lot of people ask if it's hard-working with Robert, my husband. It's not hard in the slightest because we are two very different characters. He's an easy-going character, and is happy to do what he does.

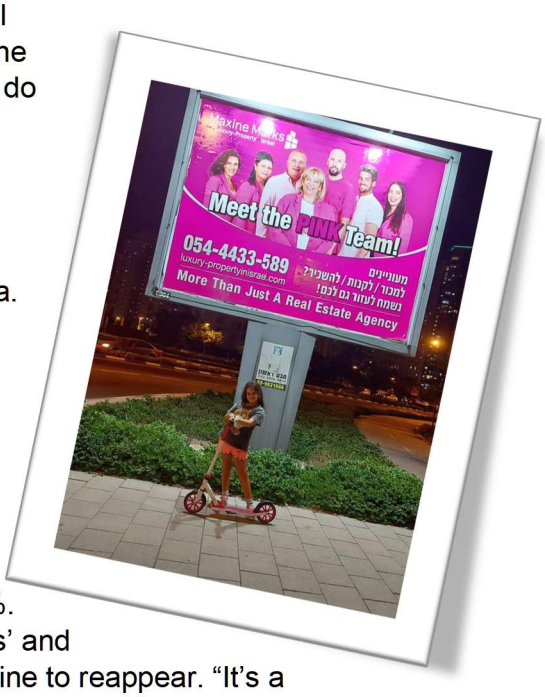


Everyone has a different role in the company, and the key is that people should do what they're best at. Of course sometimes someone will say the price should be this or that, or we should do something or not do something. But that's the same working with any colleagues. We brainstorm together as a family and I'm very open to listen to what everyone says".

Husband Robert is grinning in the background. "It's her way or…" smiles Robert, as the words trail off. "But it's always for the greater good, it's not about egos here, we are all arguing as a family about what's best for the company and it works".

Gabriella Marks is 31 years old and pregnant with her second child. Like all Maxine's children, she was born in Israel. "The best thing about working with my mother is right now. Being pregnant and having to go to lots of clinics for tests, working with my mum is ideal. And with my daughter, I can pick her up and be with her whenever I need and just say to my mum 'mum I'm going to the doctor' and she's fine with that".

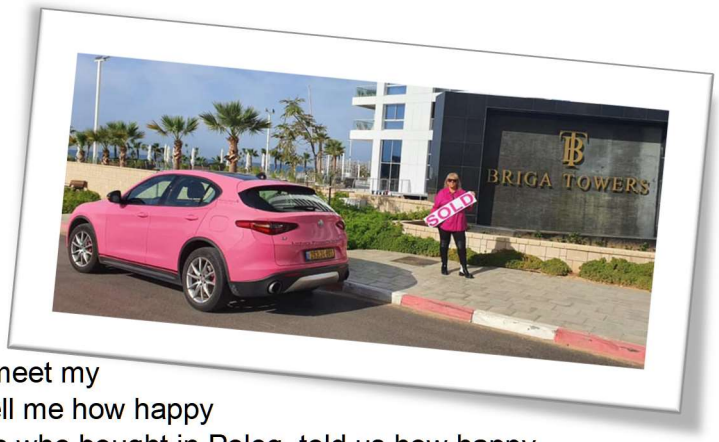
Daniel is nearly 24 and says that his mother's strong point is her ability to understand people's nature. And she understands me 100%. I love surfing and sometimes, after a hard week when I really need to do some serious relaxing, I tell her that the waves are up and I need to go surfing. And she understands and tells me to go to it. And that's nothing to do with the fact that I meet lots of clients while I'm surfing, either!".



One of Daniel's areas of expertise is after-care service, a customer service for which Maxine Marks is famous. "I'd like to think we offer the best after-care service in Netanya. We do everything from registering names, bank and municipality, set up bank orders for bills like gas, electricity, rates etc. We also find them restaurants, hairdressers, synagogues, and supply lawyers, builders and cleaners. We have regular get-togethers as clients become friends, not just with me but with each other".

The phone goes again and Maxine disappears into the house, while the volume in the garden is up by about 50%. Mika is just two years old, competing for her grandparents' and uncle's attention. I do some magic tricks and wait for Maxine to reappear. "It's a good job that Mika was born a girl, because she was wearing pink straightaway; everything in her room is pink and her clothes. I don't know what we would have done if she was a boy…", grins Maxine.

So what makes her company unique? Why do clients come to her, does she think? “I believe it’s our reputation, based on honesty. Many agents just want to get the deal done. It’s not just me saying that. People meet agents who just want their money, are happy if you see something you like, and they negotiate a sale. I feel it’s my duty to tell them the downside of their choices too. If they still want it, that’s what they choose”.



Maxine smiles-this time ignoring three messages on her phone. “You asked me before if I was an amateur psychologist. I’m actually more of a shadchan. I make a shiddach between my clients and a house. I try to make sure they buy something they’ll love forever. I genuinely meet my clients in the street and they hug me and tell me how happy they are. Just last night for example, friends who bought in Poleg, told us how happy they were in our community, and how right was their decision to move”.

Maxine explained her strategy. “It’s not just about how many bedrooms and do you want a sea view? It’s got to suit the whole family. Do they need schooling, what type of shul they go to, do they want to meet people in the area and make new friends? There are so many criteria. Are they looking for a holiday home, which is something quite different. Poleg is a very special place-and the Anglo community here is even more special. And it’s community that makes life worth living”.

So does Maxine’s company have a target audience? Another perfect time for an interruption, as Mika wants Saba to take her to the loo for the first time. From the office, the manager comes into the garden, along with the rest of the family. Everyone smiles and laughs, and Maxine takes advantage of the interlude by sending off a few emails and voice messages.



“Where was I?” she asks. Target audience, I remind her? “I have to focus on English-speaking foreigners, who have come to Israel and are going to enjoy living here. America, the UK, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand are just some of my aim. Many of my clients are between 25 and 35 and just starting families; then there’s the 50s to 70s. My clients are also a mixture of religious and non-religious retirees and people who still work”.

It was time to leave the beautiful garden and wonderful family and the food. Mika, returned from the loo was running up and down the patio, while Daniel and Gabriela conferred with their office manager about the newly-scheduled signing tomorrow. Maxine’s eldest son Adam resisted being interviewed. He’s a man who prefers to be out of the limelight, working behind the scenes to make stuff happen. He leaves the spotlight to his mother. Both seem happy with the arrangement.

As I drove away I thought that many people in life strive to balance their social, work and family life. It’s wonderful to see a perfect synchronisation of all three at Maxine Marks. And that is, I believe, the secret of their success. Oh! And despite the lawyers, the signing went through the next day.