

This Broker Canceled Her Coast-to-Coast Flights, but Not Her Cross-Country Work

To say real estate professionals have had a challenging year is an understatement. For Soozan Baxter, the coronavirus pandemic meant it was time to double down on a philosophy she's followed her entire career: work relationships matter and are essential for success, even if people can't meet face to face.

Baxter's efforts to nurture those relationships through the pandemic paid off with a bevy of new retail leases for a client two time zones away.

"Almost every conversation I have had has been brimming with meaning: sharing information, trying to find positive bits of news and hearing various perspectives from across the country," Baxter said. "In many ways, these conversations are deeper because people are so busy or exhausted that when they are talking on the phone, they are doing so with a true desire to connect — not just a 'check the box.'"

Baxter heads her own firm, Soozan Baxter Consulting, which specializes in working with retail owners, particularly those in search of luxury options. She's helped bring upscale Fifth Avenue retailers to Market Street in suburban Houston, Scottsdale Fashion Square in Arizona and Brookfield Place in Manhattan. Tenants have included Gucci, Bottega Veneta, Tory Burch, Omega, Tiffany, Louis Vuitton, Prada and Cartier.

For 14 years, Baxter was based in New York City and flew regularly to meet clients nationwide. In January, she relocated to Los Angeles, and after the virus surfaced, she put much of her travel on hold and adjusted to work from home.

"I have also started cooking, usually three to four days a week, which is a lot for me, and I enjoy a more simple lifestyle. I am grateful for these

moments," she said.

Gone too were trips to Washington, D.C., and Florida for family time.

"I miss seeing my mom and sister, but I like not having to be on a plane all the time," Baxter said.

While the travel has stopped, the work has not. It actually picked up at the Market Street open-air lifestyle center in The Woodlands, Texas. Baxter's experience shows there can be upside to a disruptive year.

"At the start of the shutdown, our team — which has worked together for a long time and is very synergistic in practices — looked at our lease plan and immediately categorized each space: bankruptcy risk, upcoming kick-out, upcoming expiration, current vacancy," Baxter explained. "Based on that, we were able to anticipate what might be coming back to the landlord to re-lease and, from there, set a course of action.

"In doing so, we made lists of potential retailers — all while the world was declaring that retail was dead forever and people thought that sweatpants would be a mainstay for life — and continued to foster our relationships with industry friends. We set monthly and weekly goals. We communicated with regularly set calls, but also amplified with additional touch-bases along the way."

The calls were done by phone and not Zoom or similar video services.

"I have likely had fewer than 10 video calls. The phone has always been my gadget of choice," she said.

The groundwork and constant updating and briefings with clients paid off. Currently, at least 10 tenants are opening new stores or expansions next year at Market Street — a record in one year since the mall opened in 2004.

Baxter said the center's policy is not to comment on new tenants until they have opened, but in general Market Street is populated with names

such as Louis Vuitton, Kendra Scott, Tiffany, Tory Burch and Lululemon. The new incoming tenants offer similar types of brands.

"I believe that 10 years from now, we will look back and realize that COVID did have blessings," Baxter said.