



**L.S. BRINKER**

A BRINKER Company

# How Brinker Partnered with Tough Leaf to Provide New Opportunity for Qualified MBE Trades

A new market. A tight timeline.  
A 30% MBE requirement.  
How Brinker partnered with  
Tough Leaf to deliver.



## About The Brinker Group

In 1989, Larry Brinker Sr. opened the doors of a carpentry company in Detroit, Michigan. Today, Brinker comprises of a family of independent companies, including L.S. Brinker, a provider of general contracting and construction management services.

Together, the family of companies provide prospective clients with a full suite of commercial construction services. These include construction management, general contracting, exterior, interior, and finished carpentry, glass and glazing, carpet and flooring, and material supply.

As a Minority Business Enterprise (MBE) certified organization, Brinker strives to achieve at least 30% diversity on every project. Brinker's reputation for quality workmanship and building great long-term relationships with its partners is a key driver of its success and continued growth.



**It's not just finding MBE firms but finding companies we can trust and can communicate with."**

— Daniel Pierce, Senior Estimator, L.S. Brinker



## A Big Project, An Unfamiliar Market

In 2024, Kiewit Corporation ranked second on ENR's list of top contractors by revenue. Brinker is working with the behemoth on a central utility plant hospital project in Detroit. This experience led Kiewit to reach out to Brinker to join them in the University of Maryland's UMD NextGen Energy Program — a wide-ranging project involving renovating buildings across campus and updating HVAC, power generation, and other infrastructure to reduce the university's energy consumption.

Kiewit has a major role in the project. The company wanted Brinker to be involved in rebuilding the central energy plant (an aging building) on UMD's campus. UMD assigned the contractor a 30% MBE requirement. Due to MBE qualification criteria in Maryland, Brinker's National Minority Supplier Development Council certification wasn't eligible for fulfilling the requirement — so Brinker set out on its standard practice to hire quality subs local to the Maryland market.

Approximately 95% of the projects Brinker bids on are in the Detroit market, where the firm has deep relationships. Working in Maryland meant building a new network from scratch — and doing it on a compressed timeline without sacrificing the high standards Brinker applies to every project.

## Partnering With Tough Leaf

Brinker and Tough Leaf had met earlier that year at a conference. Brinker partnered with Tough Leaf to help execute its strategy for securing the best of the best trades for this contract's specific scope of work. Brinker set up the bid packages and drawings in BuildingConnected and identified what was needed for the project. They then added the Tough Leaf team to the project, and Tough Leaf, on behalf of Brinker, began calling all the trades.

The phone calls were a difference maker. Rather than an email getting lost as presumed spam, calls from Tough Leaf gave subs a clearer picture of the project — a major job with major names attached.



**// By the time I got to talking to the subs, they already knew a lot about the project. The process made us feel comfortable sitting down and hiring these people."**

— Daniel Pierce, Senior Estimator, L.S. Brinker

Results were delivered to Pierce with all necessary information, so he could quickly determine whether more outreach was needed. Tough Leaf's partnership in interacting with the small and certified subcontractors gave Brinker the ability to execute its high standard due diligence in the pre-qualification process and at a more optimal speed. The subs had all of their credentials and background verified by Tough Leaf, in addition to being briefed about Kiewit's robust safety program requirements.

**// Almost immediately, I realized that Tough Leaf was treating the project as if it was their own, which gave me a real sense of comfort. Tough Leaf's sense of urgency, attention to detail, and network made me feel like they were the right partner."**

— Daniel Pierce, Senior Estimator, L.S. Brinker

## Completing The Puzzle At Scale

Typically, GC's and CM's receive bid packages with 2-3 weeks to bid the job. During that time, estimators need to review drawings, write scopes, level bids, and get subcontractor prices across a dozen packages — all simultaneously. Outreach to subs is just one piece, but it's time-intensive as it could easily mean making 100 phone calls.

On the project at hand (rebuilding UMC's central energy plant), Brinker needed to leverage a partner like Tough Leaf to optimize the time and talent of its internal team within the timeline, location, and demands of the project.

Tough Leaf empowered Brinker to more easily and effectively complete the puzzle.

Nearly 180 certified subcontractors across 12 bid packages were identified and engaged for this project. In the end, Brinker got 38 bids across 10 packages — 3 to 4 per package — meeting their goals. Tough Leaf, which was contracted before the second wave efforts to find certified subs, identified 30 of those 38 bidders.

How was Tough Leaf able to successfully assist Brinker? The company had multiple people working on the project during the two weeks that the bid was being prepared.

Brinker estimates Tough Leaf saved them 240 hours of outreach and coordination work on this project alone.

## Meeting And Exceeding MBE Requirements

Kiewit's overall MBE target for the full NextGen Energy Program — which also includes leading the reconstruction of the Key Bridge — was 30%. For Brinker's scope on the central energy plant, the goal was to maximize MBE participation as much as possible.

Other than the mason, each sub is an MBE, which ultimately has led to the project reaching 90% MBE participation.

**// Tough Leaf fills a need in the market. They can hand the work to Tough Leaf, and you can stop worrying about it because you know it will be done."**

— Daniel Pierce, Senior Estimator, L.S. Brinker

### About Tough Leaf

Tough Leaf is a subcontractor sourcing and compliance platform built for prime contractors and government teams who need a reliable way to find qualified small and certified subcontractors, manage project requirements, and track participation and spend from bid through construction. Unlike static directories or manual spreadsheets, Tough Leaf brings sourcing, compliance, and reporting into one connected workflow — giving teams clarity, consistency, and confidence across every project.

With Tough Leaf, teams can match with qualified subcontractors by trade, location, and certification; access continuously updated profiles and documentation; and coordinate outreach with full visibility into who was contacted and when. Participation, documentation, and spend are tracked in a single system, making it easy to generate clear, defensible records without manual data wrangling or chasing outdated contacts.