



Digital marketing CASE STUDY

HIGHER EDUCATION

A competitive search strategy for the same healthcare university college: how Google Auction Insights exposed a five-way fight for visibility, and how the account took second place on search impression share and absolute top of page against four larger, multi-faculty rivals, on the smallest budget in the group.



Second place in a five-way auction, on the smallest budget in it.

How a single-discipline healthcare college went from defending its own name to outranking three multi-faculty universities for the most valuable position on the page.

Client	A private healthcare university college in the Klang Valley
Competitive set	Four multi-faculty private universities, all larger
Service	Digital marketing: competitive search strategy
Period	April to August 2026, competitive data June to August
Media budget	RM4,900 per month, the smallest in the auction
Outcome	Second on search impression share, second on absolute top of page

The starting point

In April 2026 the college was playing pure defence, and it did not know who it was playing against.

The account bid on the institution's own name and very little else. That is the standard posture across Malaysian higher education and it feels safe, because the numbers always look good. Brand terms are cheap, they convert, the reports look healthy. What that posture actually does is protect the students you already have and win you none of the ones you do not.

More importantly, nobody had ever looked at Auction Insights. Google publishes, free, inside every advertiser's account, the exact list of who else is bidding on your keywords, how often they appear, and how often they take the best position. Almost no institution reads it. The college had no idea it was in a five-way fight, or who the other four were.

The challenge

A single-discipline specialist with one campus and a RM4,900 monthly budget, competing in the same auctions as multi-faculty universities carrying budgets many times larger.

Conventional logic says a small advertiser loses that fight and should retreat to its own brand terms. We took the opposite view, because Google does not sell the top of the page. It awards it, on bid and Quality Score together. Budget is only one of the two inputs, and it is the one we could not change. The other one was entirely within our control.

The approach

Three moves, in sequence. The order is the strategy.

Move one: secure the base before attacking anything

You cannot conquest from a weak position. If a rival can intercept students searching your own name, spending money chasing theirs is indefensible. So the brand lane was locked first: 82 to 88 percent

impression share on core name terms, at Quality Scores of 8 to 10, with 82.58 percent of exact-match brand impressions appearing at the top of the page.

Move two: enter the auctions where the rivals actually are

The five-way fight does not happen on brand terms. Nobody else bids on this college's name. It happens on course terms: nursing, allied health sciences, managerial science, continuous professional development. Building the faculty lane was not only a demand play, it was how the account entered the competitive market at all.

Move three: bid on the competitors directly

Most institutions defend their own name and stop there. This account went further and bid on the search terms of competing universities, so that a student typing a rival's name into Google saw this college above the organic results. Not aggressive, simply present at the moment a student is comparing options.

Where it ended: the auction scoreboard

Google Auction Insights, search campaigns, 1 June to 31 August 2026. Every institution below competed for the same students, in the same auctions, in the same three months.

10.41%

Search impression share, second in the auction

31.26%

Impressions at absolute top of page, second in the auction

17

Applications from students who started elsewhere

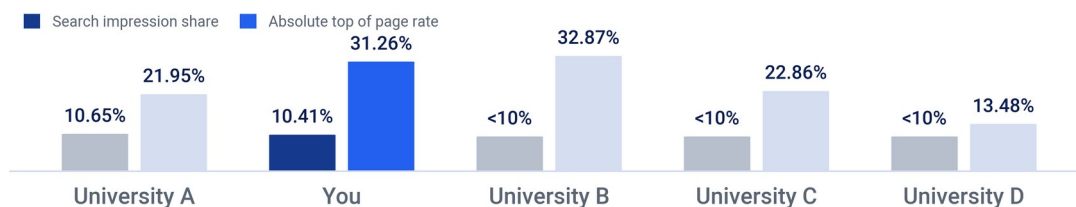
Institution	Search impression share	Absolute top of page
Multi-faculty university A	10.65%	21.95%
This college	10.41%	31.26%
Multi-faculty university B	below 10%	32.87%
Multi-faculty university C	below 10%	22.86%
Multi-faculty university D	below 10%	13.48%

Google reports any impression share below 10 percent as "below 10%" without a precise figure. Institution names withheld.

Auction insights ⓘ						
Custom		Jun 1 – Aug 31, 2026		Show last 30 days		
⚙ Add filter	Search ▾		☰ Segment	☰ Columns	⬇ Download	⌵ Expand
Display URL domain	↓ Impression share	Overlap rate	Position above rate	Top of page rate	Abs. Top of page rate	Outranking share
University A	10.65%	13.71%	55.00%	78.28%	21.95%	9.62%
You	10.41%	—	—	67.56%	31.26%	—
University D	< 10%	12.65%	42.27%	71.79%	13.48%	9.85%
University C	< 10%	17.17%	56.83%	79.01%	22.86%	9.39%
University B	< 10%	5.68%	68.98%	78.33%	32.87%	10.00%
1 - 5 of 5						

Source: Google Ads Auction Insights, 1 June–31 August 2026. Institution names generalised to match the anonymisation used throughout this case study.

AUCTION INSIGHTS, 1 JUNE–31 AUGUST 2026



Second on visibility

10.41 percent search impression share, a quarter of a percentage point behind first, and ahead of three universities reporting below 10 percent. On the smallest budget in the group.

Second on the position that actually matters

Absolute top of page is the first paid advertisement, above every organic result on the page. It is the single most valuable position in search. This college occupied it on 31.26 percent of impressions, ahead of three of the four rivals, two of which appear at roughly two thirds of that rate.

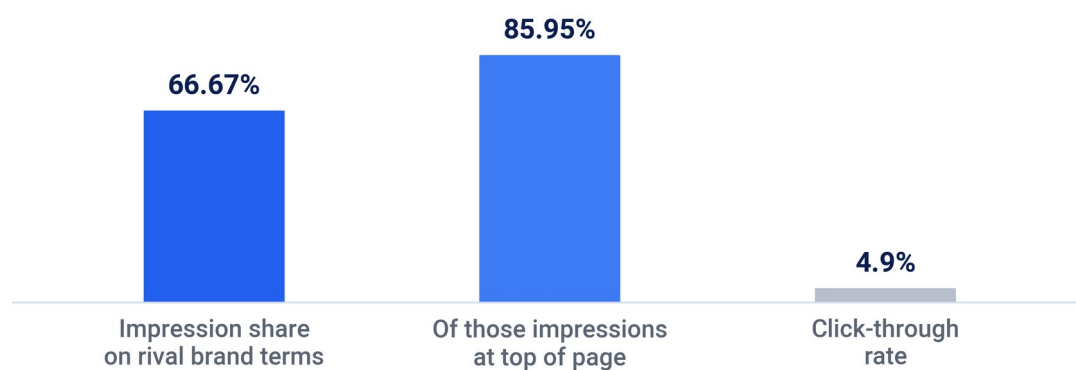
And the conquering worked

Competitor lane result	Figure
Impression share on rival brand terms	66.67%
Of those impressions at top of page	85.95%
Click-through rate	4.90%
Qualified visits from students shopping a rival	143
Applications from students who started elsewhere	17

Two out of every three times a student searched one of these rivals by name, this college appeared. Eighty-six percent of the time it appeared above the organic results.

CONQUESTING ON COMPETITOR SEARCH TERMS

Performance when a student searched a rival by name, Apr–Aug 2026



What made the difference

1. Quality Score is the budget multiplier

This is the whole case study in one line. The smallest advertiser in the auction took the best position more often than three larger ones, because Google awards position on bid and Quality Score together and this account held Quality Scores of 8 to 10. You cannot buy your way past relevance. It is the lever an institution reaches for when it will never win on spend alone.

2. Sequence beat aggression

Conquesting gets the attention, but it only worked because the brand lane was locked first. An account that bids on rivals while leaking its own name is not being bold, it is subsidising the competition. Base first, always.

3. The scoreboard was already there

Auction Insights is free, sitting inside every Google Ads account, and it names your competitors and ranks you against them. Reading it, rather than assuming the account was invisible, is what turned a five-way fight nobody knew about into a five-way fight this college could win.

4. We reported the limits of the data, not just the headline

Google withholds precise impression share below 10 percent, so three of the four rivals here are only measurable as "less than". Second place is reported on that basis, and no further. It is possible a rival sits at 9.9 percent. Stating the limit plainly, rather than rounding it in our own favour, is what makes the number trustworthy.

5. Conquesting converts differently, by design

Click-through rate on competitor terms was 4.90 percent against 7.46 percent on brand. Lower, and it should be. These are students who had already typed somebody else's name. Seventeen of them applied here instead. Judge the lane on incremental students captured, not on rate parity with brand.

6. A position held, reported as what it is

The competitive data covers June to August 2026. There is no earlier Auction Insights reading for this account, so the case shown here is the position the college holds today, not a climb charted over time. The claim is that a specialist college competes at the top of a market against institutions many times its size, on the smallest budget in the group. That claim stands on its own.

What this means for an institution reading it

If you advertise on Google, you are already in an auction like this one, with a named list of rivals and a scoreboard showing exactly where you sit. You almost certainly have not looked at it.

That report takes us about a day to pull, and it costs you nothing to see it.

About 3thirds Inc

3thirds Inc Sdn. Bhd. has operated in the Malaysian market since 1997. We are a Google Partner and a full-service integrated agency, covering search, YouTube, social, out-of-home media and CRM automation, planned together rather than bought separately.

We would love to pull your auction report and walk you through it. No charge, no commitment.

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Client and competitor names withheld. Figures drawn from Google Ads Auction Insights, search campaigns, 1 June to 31 August 2026, and from the client account, 1 April to 31 August 2026.

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