

Case Study 6:

We Turned Off Paid Ads for 69 Days... and **Lost 85% of Our Organic & Direct Traffic**. The Halo Effect That Changed Everything.

JWB&CO / 2026

greater ROI

Are paid ads the enemy of organic growth?
For years, the prevailing fear in small
business circles, Reddit threads, Quora
debates, and even agency advice has been
this toxic trio of myths and tropes:

MYTH 1:

"If you run Google Ads, Google will punish your organic rankings."

The classic conspiracy: "They're making you pay twice — once for ads, then by burying your free results." Many still believe spending money on PPC creates a direct penalty, demoting your site in organic search to force more ad reliance. (Echoed endlessly in older forums: "Don't run ads or you'll tank your SEO!")

MYTH 2:

"Running Meta/Facebook/Instagram ads kills your organic reach on the platform."

The "pay-to-play punishment" narrative: "Once you start boosting posts or running campaigns, the algorithm throttles your free posts to make you dependent on paid." People whisper about "shadow bans" or deliberate suppression — "Facebook hates organic now because you're paying elsewhere." Countless creators and pages pause ads hoping their reach "recovers," only to stay disappointed.

MYTH 3:

"Pausing paid ads will free up / boost your organic and direct traffic."

The hopeful flip-side: "Ads just steal clicks from your free listings — turn them off, and users will flock to organic results or type your URL directly instead." This leads to the assumption that organic/direct should hold steady (or rise) without paid support, revealing "true" independent performance.

Do any of these sound familiar? What then is the real truth? We ran a study for a client over 69 days and counting and here are the results.

2026 'Paid' Blackout Test - 82-85% Halo Dependency Exposed (Google + Meta)

Background

A our client ran sustained 14 month PPC campaign across Google Ads (Search/PMax/Display) and Meta Ads (Facebook/Instagram). Paid delivered solid last-click performance, but questions arose about true incrementality vs. halo on organic/direct.

A natural experiment to pause all spend emerged which gave us unequivocal evidence that paid advertising augments massively organic and direct traffic to a website.

Methodology

Treatment:

All Google + Meta campaigns turned off Jan 1 – Mar 9, 2026 (~69 days).

Control/Baseline:

Same period Jan 1 – Mar 9, 2025 (paid active).

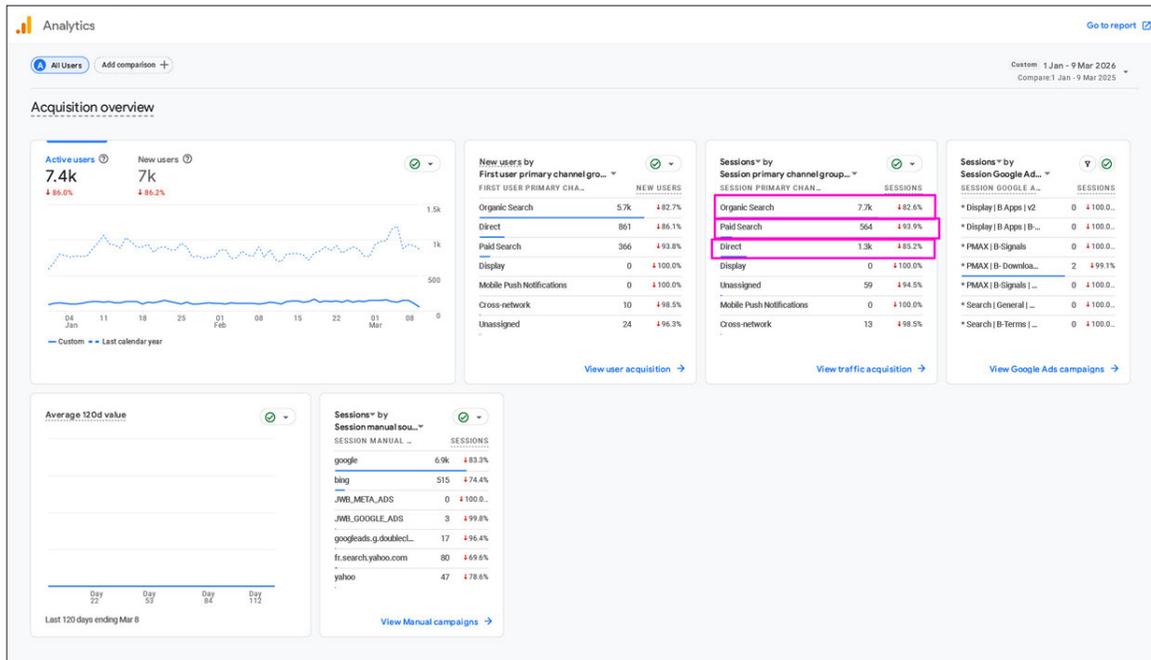
Measurement:

GA4 Acquisition reports (default channel grouping), YoY comparison. No major site/SEO changes noted.

Strong before/after design — longer pause captures full adstock decay (awareness fade over weeks/months).

We compared same time stamp 1 Jan - March 9, 2026 with what we were doing in that same period last year, 2025 when all campaigns were live.

GA4 / Acquisition overview



Key Results (from GA4 screenshot left)

Organic Search sessions:

-82.6% (to 7.7k).

Direct sessions:

-85.2% (to 1.3k).

Paid Search:

-93.9% (to 564, near-zero).

New users from Organic:

-82.7% (to 5.7k).

Active users overall:

Sharp YoY decline (baseline implied 40k+ sessions pre-pause).

Other channels as expected.

Analysis & Interpretation

The drops match classic halo-effect patterns in 2025–2026 incrementality tests:

- Organic/Search collapsed because paid drove branded queries (Meta awareness - Google branded search).
- Direct fell as ad recall decayed (**users no longer remembered**/typed URL).
- No organic rebound = no cannibalization; instead, **net creation of traffic**.

Comparable cases:

- Google Ads pause - organic “tanked” same day, rebounded instantly on restart (awareness halo).
- Full paid blackout - total visits -17–68%, with halo worth tens of thousands of extra sessions despite minor organic lift.
- Meta “search halo”: High Meta share - 20–25% revenue crash on pause via lost unbranded/branded search.
- Our 2.5-month test revealed full dependency — **paid manufactured ~80%+ of non-paid traffic** via sustained visibility.

Implications

True paid ROI far exceeds last-click (halo multiplies value **2–5× higher/greater**).

Brand has minimal independent organic moat — **visibility relies on paid “maintenance.”**

In 2026 (AI Overviews, expanded paid Search Engine Results Page (SERP) real estate), paid is essential for baseline awareness.

Recommendations

Restart paid urgently at a sustainable “floor” level:

Meta awareness/video for top-funnel, Google branded + PMax for capture. Scale cautiously while monitoring halo rebound.

Build independence:

Ramp content/SEO (target non-branded terms), email/SMS lists, YouTube organic to reduce future risk.

Advanced measurement:

- Google incrementality experiments or Meta GeoLift for ongoing tests.
- GA4 data-driven attribution + custom segments (branded vs. non-branded).
- Track Google Search Console branded queries — expect sharp drop/rebound mirroring this.

- Test shorter pauses (2–4 weeks) next time to measure partial decay.

Budget insight:

Treat paid as non-negotiable infrastructure (e.g., minimum 20–30% of prior spend for halo maintenance) + growth layer.

Conclusion

This blackout wasn’t a failure — it’s gold-standard proof of effective paid marketing.

Your campaigns weren’t just acquiring; they were **sustaining the brand’s entire visible ecosystem**. Most brands never quantify this halo so dramatically. Sustained investment isn’t just a wish, but a must while diversifying sources. Turn on paid, watch organic/direct rebound (often within days/weeks), and layer in organic growth for resilience.

Key takeaways

Our campaigns weren't just acquiring; **they were sustaining the brand's entire visible ecosystem.** Most brands never quantify this halo so dramatically.

This test is a win, not a red flag. **It proves your Google + Meta investment was powering ~80%+ of what appeared as non-paid traffic** through powerful halo effects. Most brands never get this clean a read and continue over- or under-investing.

So now we know the true economics: **paid is not optional for it is essential.** **It is your awareness engine.**

What is a halo effect?

Halo/Incrementality Dominance (Primary Driver)
Paid campaigns (Google + Meta) were fueling ~80–85% of what GA4 labeled as "Organic Search" and "Direct."

Branded search halo:

Users saw Meta ads or Google Display/YouTube - later searched your brand name on Google (shows as Organic Search). **Pause removes exposure - branded queries plummet - organic collapses.**

Direct halo:

Repeated ad views built recall in the marketplace/ with target audiences - users type URL directly,

bookmark, or return via app/email without referrer (shows as Direct). Long pause (2+ months as we have tested) **lets recall decay fully and utterly.**

Our provided evidence aligns with real 2025–2026 cases: Pausing Google Ads caused same-day organic drops (then instant rebound on restart - this is what we are expecting as well when restart is actioned); full paid blackouts led to 17–68% total traffic loss despite minor organic gains elsewhere. Your longer test exposed the full halo, **paid wasn't stealing from organic; it was creating most of it.**

Authentic proof

Christopher Houlihan, Chief Executive, Mercy Education Limited

I am writing this letter to recommend to you the excellent support and service of Joe Brooks and his team from JWB&Co which was received in their provision of marketing consultancy and project planning for a major change in one of Mercy Education's school's operations. The school, St Aloysius Girls School, after providing an excellent Catholic education for girls, will open its doors to boys for the first time in Year 7 and progress to become a fully co-educational school by 2028.. The simultaneous marketing campaign instilled confidence in the community of the new direction of the school and has engendered significant interest that is now being realised in increasing enrolment enquiries and widespread acceptance of the school transitioning into co-education.

Joe's theme which anchored the marketing project of 'Life is Co-Ed and so are we in 2023' has captured the imagination of the community and the College will build on this to provide a strong foundation for families choosing to send their sons and daughters to St Aloysius College. Joe's work has been instrumental in setting this foundation.

I have no hesitation in recommending Joe and JWB&Co to you for your consideration.

Mary Farrah, St Aloysius Girls College, Principal

JWB&CO have delivered an outstanding campaign for the College moving to co-education in 2023. Their expertise, passion and knowledge displayed flexibility in drafting and editing, all ensuring the very best possible outcome was delivered. They worked very closely with the leadership team, taking the team through every step of the process and ensuring that their voice was both heard and a clear understanding of the information was best implemented. I have enjoyed working with the JWB&CO team, their expertise and professionalism in communication is second to none and I recommend them unreservedly.

April Honeyman, St Columba's Girls College, Principal

I have know Joe Brooks for approximately 15 years during which we have worked together on the creation and development of a College prospectus for two very different Catholic girls' schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. In both schools, the development was not only the prospectus, but also a variety of accompanying materials including: letterhead, envelopes, report covers, cards, signs for buildings and advertisements. The whole process was aided by Joe's ability to listen to the basic tenants of the College's point of difference in a crowded market place and to turn these into creative and innovative designs. This ability, along with his personal qualities and attributes, particularly, his skill in engaging persons from all manner of diversity, resulted in a distinctive product of which we were very proud. I would have no hesitation in recommending JWB&CO.

Suzy Chandler, Fintona Girls' School, Principal

JWB&CO have delivered a first class service. They have worked with me and the Marketing Manager to understand the nature of Fintona Girls' School and produced marketing material that reflects our ethos, the students and the community. JWB&CO's creative is modern, vibrant and sends a clear and accurate message regarding the School whether it is about Open Days, VCE results or other initiatives we are undertaking. JWB&CO are very easy to work with and readily fits in with ideas and expectations around deadlines.

David Baker, Former Principal Gippsland Grammar School, Principal of Woodleigh School

During my time as Principal, I have worked with Joe to identify our points of difference and develop a positioning statement for the School. This was a very pleasing and engaging process, in particular, Joe's creative influence was critical in this process. JWB&CO were able to take these ideas and statements to produce a comprehensive and unique marketing program that clearly articulates the ethos of Gippsland Grammar. Joe and his team are very easy to work with, they are timely with regard to meeting deadlines and professional in all that they do. Their creative attitude has ensured that our School branding is significantly unique within the independent schools' market whilst also accurately representing the culture of our school. I highly recommend JWB&CO for your next marketing and branding initiative.

Joanne McKenzie, Beaconhills College, Head of Admissions and Marketing

Absolutely love working with Joe Brooks and the JWB&CO team. Responsive, creative of course, full of energy and zest. I don't hesitate to throw them a variety of creative design challenges and have been thrilled with the results. From our International prospectus, to our College magazine and bus branding all have been delivered on time and on-brand.

Johann Hudson, Christ Church Grammar School, South Yarra, Registrar & Executive Assistant to Principal

On behalf of my team I would like to commend you and your team on the past year working together [2019-2020]. We have learnt so much and we have been guided expertly by yourselves with our marketing and social media. My thanks for your continual advice and guidance and also your support in our enrolment processes and our marketing plan moving forward. We are currently sitting at 30% up on last year's new enrolments in a horrid Covid year, which is contributed to your advice. Thanks again and we look forward to working with you in the future.

Nicole Roache, The Geelong College, Marketing Manager

We loved working with Joe and the JWB&CO team on our current prospectus. They were intuitive to our needs and that of our target audience, innovative and the finished product is a truly beautiful reflection of who we are as a school.

About

JWB&CO is a full service end-to-end brand and marketing studio specialising in education for over 28 years.

We build brands in education. This in turn builds enrolments and community. Our track record over the past 28 years bears this out.

We provide strategic branding, marketing and creative solutions from strategy to execution on time and on budget.

Joe, has a BFA in Visual Communications and graduated Cum Laude from the Maryland Institute College of Art in the USA, he is the studio creative director and has lectured at Swinburne University in branding, placemaking and design. He also is a certified instructor and holds a current Certificate Four in Training and Assessment.

Some of the schools we have and are working for and branding campaigns we have created:

Fintona Girls School
"Great things come in a small package", prospectus and rebrand campaign

St Aloysius, College North Melbourne,
Launching their NEW Co-ed School ad campaign to market, "Life is co-ed and so are we in 2023", prospectus and rebrand campaign

Christ Church Grammar School, South Yarra,
All creative, brand and communication management, strategy and execution, prospectus and rebrand campaign

Brighton Grammar School "We teach boys", prospectus and rebrand campaign

Loreto Mandeville Hall
"Madeline", illustrative approach, prospectus and rebrand campaign

Marymede Catholic College
"A Complete Education", prospectus and rebrand campaign

MLC, Sydney
"Why zig when you can zag", prospectus and rebrand campaign

Ringwood Trade
Branding elements including environmental signage - internal and external

Hume Anglican Grammar
Masterplan, placemaking signage

PLC, Sydney
Prospectus and rebrand campaign

Kincoppal Rose Bay, Sydney,
Prospectus and rebrand campaign

CLC Eltham
"Girls flourish here", prospectus and rebrand campaign

CBC St Kilda
"Cultivating boys character", prospectus and rebrand campaign,

OLSH, Adelaide
"For all girls", prospectus and rebrand campaign

St Columba's College Prospectus and rebrand campaign

Siena College
Prospectus, ad campaign and rebrand campaign

Geelong, Grammar Market research and rebrand positioning, omnichannel ad campaign

Geelong College
Prospectus, prospectus and rebrand campaign,

Gippsland Grammar School
All creative, brand and prospectus, website, communication management, strategy and execution

Sacred Heart College Geelong
Fundraising document for new College Library, prospectus and rebrand campaign

Beaconhills College
Magazine redesign and ongoing design, prospectus and rebrand campaign

Cornish College
Brand and marketing

Ringwood Secondary College
Branding elements including environmental signage - external

Melbourne Girls Grammar
Branding and advertising

University of Melbourne
Centre of Indigenous Health

Swinburne University
Development Office capital campaign

SCECGS Redlands
Development collateral

Launceston Grammar
Development of multiply ad campaigns and comms

Bunbury Church Grammar Grammar
Development of multiply ad campaigns and comms

Flinders Christian Community College
Development of multiply ad campaigns and comms

St Mary's College, Windsor
Prospectus and rebrand campaign, development of omnichannel ad campaigns and brand communications

DOSCEL [Diocese of Sale Catholic Education], St Josephine Bakhita Catholic Primary School Principal and Minx architects
Placemaking and wayfinding signage program from design to fabrication and installation.

Thank you from
the JWB&CO team.