

Search Engine Optimization Basics Part 3 “ Meta Tags ”

As part of the continued series "Getting Back To Search Engine Optimization Basics", Andy Beal takes a closer look at Meta description and Meta keywords tags. Do you still need them and what benefits do they bring?

If you have been following this series, you will know that we have so far covered the importance of search engine marketing (SEM), effective keyword research and title tag formats. As we move through the ‘Back to Basics’ series we find ourselves at the notorious topic of Meta tags, ‘specifically description’ and ‘keywords tags’. Now, I know what you are thinking; surely we don’t need to worry about Meta tags, as most search engines ignore them and for the most part you would be right. The importance of Meta tags has diminished so considerably over the past couple of years, that I fully expect this to be the last article that I will write discussing their optimization. That’s not to say that they are already a dead issue, but in the next 6-12 months their importance will be virtually extinguished.

So, if this will likely be my last article on the topic, what is there left to discuss? Well actually there are still a few things you should consider when researching and constructing Meta tags. While search engine marketing has moved into the realms of page themes, keyword density, content and linking, Meta tags can still provide some benefits.

The History of the Description Tag

The Meta description tag is located in the <head> area of your website’s HTML code and its content is sometimes displayed in the results page of crawler search engines. The description tag looks something like this in your code:

```
<meta name="description" content="Brief description of the contents of the page">
```

It used to be that all search engines would pull this information and use it as part of their search results. Not only would your search engine listing include information from your title tag, but also below it would be a copy of your Meta description tag. With this predictable structure, search engine marketers could manipulate the way their website listing was displayed in the search engine results by changing these tags. In addition, the Meta description tag would have great importance when determining which position your website showed up in the search results. The number of keywords, their relevance and density within the description tag could be manipulated to help achieve the elusive #1 position on the search engine results.

Then along came Google

When Google became the search engine of preference, it ushered in a new era of how search engine listings are displayed. Google chose not to use the Meta description tag and instead rely on the content contained within a website. The biggest impact from this decision resulted in the Meta description having no significance whatsoever on where a website is positioned within Google's results. A website owner could optimize their description tag to the highest degree, and it would have little effect on how their website was positioned in Google. The other effect of choosing to ignore the description tag was that Google did not use this information as part of the website's listing; instead formulating it's own description using content extracted from the web page itself (only if there is very little page content will you see Google display the meta description). When it became apparent that Google's approach was successful, other search engines started following suit to the point that few search engines today spider and display the Meta description tag.

So why optimize the Meta Description Tag?

So with so many search engines choosing to ignore the description tag, why bother to optimize it? The answer is simple. It takes just a couple of minutes to optimize the Meta tags on the web page you are building. While you may not influence the likes of Google, Yahoo, or AOL, there are plenty of smaller search engines that still spider the Meta description tag. The largest of these is Inktomi, which was recently acquired by Yahoo. Although, Yahoo has not yet switched its search results to the Inktomi database, there are still many search engines that rely on Inktomi results. The biggest Inktomi audience comes from MSN's web page results. The web page results at MSN come after featured sites, sponsored sites and web directory results but nonetheless they are there. While you are unlikely to have your Inktomi listing displayed on MSN for generic terms such as 'computers' or 'Compaq' you should see traffic from MSN for longer, more specific terms such as 'refurbished Compaq computers'. The more specific the term, the more likely that MSN will rely on the spidering technology of Inktomi to provide the search results. And with OneStat.com reporting in April 2003 that 45% of all searches are for phrases with three words or more, you can see that there is still a large audience to reach by optimizing your Meta description tag and targeting crawlers such as Inktomi.

So how should you optimize the Meta description tag?

Like every other aspect of search engine marketing, relevancy is the key to obtaining better search engine ranking. While your competitors may include dozens and dozens of search phrases in their description tag, fewer, more targeted phrases will increase the relevancy of

the web page and will provide a greater benefit from your description tag. Unless you have a small website that has only a few pages, resulting in the need to place many phrases in each description tag, you should aim for around 5-10 phrases in each description. Keep each of the phrases within the same theme and you will further increase your chances of better search engine ranking for that page. An optimized description tag might look something like this:

```
<meta name="description" content="Desktop computers and computer hardware supplies for home and office.">
```

As you can see there are many keyword combinations that can be extracted from the above description tag. The most important phrases are at the start of the description, which adds to your chances of better search engine rankings. However, the search engines can also extract their own word combinations such as 'office computer supplies'. With Inktomi providing a paid inclusion service which re-spiders and indexes your website every 48 hours, you can change and manipulate your Meta tags to find a format that works best for your website. Whenever formatting your description tag, remember that most search engines that continue to spider description tags also use that tag when displaying your listing. With that in mind, make sure that the description tag is inviting and coherent as well as optimized.

What to do with the Keywords Tag?

Much of the advice for your description tag also holds true for your Meta keywords tag. The keywords tag used to be very important when optimizing a website with all the search engines spidering and utilizing the information. When it became obvious to the search engines that webmasters were stuffing their keywords tags with dozens of unrelated search terms, the search engines moved away from algorithms that used information collected from keywords tags. We are now at the stage where, very few search engines use the keywords tags to any significant degree. However, examine your traffic logs and you will be surprised at how many different search engines bring traffic to your website. I'll bet there are many small search engines, bringing traffic to your website, that you have never heard of before. With many of these smaller search engines relying on older technology, and with it only taking a couple of minutes to add a keywords tag, it is worthwhile to at least look at the way you format your meta keywords tag.

Optimizing the Keywords Tag

Within your website code, your keywords tag will look something like this:

```
<meta name="keywords" content="keyword 1, keyword 2, keyword 3">
```

I'm not going to spend long discussing the format and optimization of the keywords tag, just as I do not expect you to spend hours optimizing them. That being said, make sure that you use your keywords tag to include words that might be missing from your web page content or perhaps include alternate spellings of words. I have also found it beneficial to include product SKUs or manufacturers model numbers in your keywords tag. These in particular tend to be very targeted keywords with fewer competitors. This often results in their inclusion in your keywords tag providing the edge over a website not using a keywords tag. In addition, the keywords tag is a great place to add geographical search terms such as the city you operate in, the county or even the State.

While you can add as many keywords as you wish to your keywords tag, I would avoid using more than 20-25. Don't agonize over the use or non-use of commas and forget any thoughts of repeating a keyword over and over again. An effective keywords tag may look like this:

```
<meta name="keywords" content="Presario 800t, s400t, s300nx, wake county, Raleigh, North Carolina, NC">
```

As you can see in the example above, the best use of the keywords tag is for targeting either obscure terms, model numbers or targeted regions. Using this approach will help you get the most out of the limited benefit of the keywords tag.

Written by search engine marketing expert [Andy Beal](#).



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