

Meta Tags and Search Engines

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This article will explain what Meta Tags are, which ones are important and the role they play in your website's appearance in a search engine results list.

The code of every web page (or HTML document, to be perfectly accurate) is comprised of two components: the Header (or Head) and the Body. The Header contains general information, or *meta*-information, *about* the page. The Body contains the content of the page that will be displayed in the visitor's browser. The meta-information in the Header is not displayed to visitors and is typically the exclusive domain of the web designer. It is this meta-information that concerns us here.

The information in the Header is labeled using Meta Tags. Originally Meta Tags were a tool webmasters used to tell search engines what the site was about. This in turn helped the search engines rank sites, list them in their indexes and present them accurately in search results.

Although there are many types of Meta Tags, when it comes to Search Engines there are only a few we need concern ourselves with.

The Title Tag

Although it is not technically a Meta Tag, the Title Tag is important because it contains the words that will appear in the title bar of your site visitor's browser. The contents of the Title Tag will also appear in bold as the title of your page in the list of search engine results. The page that you're currently reading is entitled "Meta Tags and Search Engines by gacWebSolutions". Its Title Tag looks like this:

```
<title>Meta Tags and Search Engines by gacWebSolutions</title>
```

The Title Tag plays a vital role in determining your site's search engine rankings. You should therefore carefully select the words that appear in your Title Tag as well as the order in which they appear. If your site's objective is to sell a product, use your best sales phrase as your title. Alternatively you could list some of the brands you offer. Your goal is to present your most relevant information in as few words as possible. If you must include your company name in your title, put it at the end of the Title Tag. Google, for example, will only read the first 90 characters of your Title Tag.

Keep in mind that each page in your site can have its own Title Tag. Too many web designers use a single Title Tag throughout the entire site. Search Engines will be more generous if each page has its own Title Tag tailored to the theme and content of the page.

The Description Tag

Think back to the last time you used a search engine. When the results list appeared you probably read the title of each listing first followed by the descriptions that appeared under the titles you thought looked the most promising. The Description Tag provides the description that the search engine will display in its search results list. For this reason it is key to attracting

people to your site over the many others that will appear in the results list. If you fail to provide this tag, most search engines will create a description for you but why not take a few minutes to write the description yourself?

The Description Tag for this page looks like this:

```
<META NAME="description" CONTENT="Meta Tags influence  
your web page's appearance in search engine results listings.">
```

Because most search engines limit how much of the description they will display, you want to keep your Description Tag short but informative. If your Description Tag is more than a dozen words or so you run the chance of having it truncated. If you absolutely must use a long Description Tag, put the most relevant words up front.

The Keywords Tag

Unlike the Title Tag and Description Tag, the contents of the Keywords Tag never appear either in the visitor's browser or in the search engine results list. Some search engines, however, will read the keywords tag and take it into consideration when ranking the page in the results of a search on the words it contains.

The general rules are that you should only include words that appear in the page and you shouldn't use any word more than three times. In order for each word to have the maximum impact, I recommend limiting yourself to 10 words or fewer. Here's what the Keywords Tag looks like for this page:

```
<META NAME="keywords" CONTENT="meta, tags,  
keywords, ranking, search, results, website, design">
```

The Keywords Tag used to be the most critical part of any search engine optimization effort. Lately, however, its importance has been diluted due to increased abuse by web designers and the resultant increase in sophistication of search engine algorithms. I still use the Keywords Tag on my pages, but I don't obsess over it.

Meta Tags as Marketing Tools

Once everyone realized how important a high search engine ranking is to a website's success, competition for the top spots heated up. Web designers started using Meta Tags to manipulate the system. They would overload the Keywords Tag in an effort to claw their way to the top of the list. It got so bad that some web designers were writing Keyword Tags a page long with many of the words having no relation to the page contents. Obviously a search engine's value lies in its ability to present accurate and objective results. If a search engine's ranking algorithm is open to manipulation it would be of little use. As a result most search engines stopped supporting the Keywords Tag, relying more and more on advanced heuristic processes to maintain their accuracy and objectivity.

Where does that leave us? As I've already said, I still incorporate keywords into the sites I design but I don't devote much time to them. In contrast, the Title Tag and Description Tag are vital as they can control how your website will be described when it appears in a search results list. These two tags, more than any other, still deserve our attention... at least for now.

Before long all Meta Tags will be useless as devices for marketing your site to the search engines. In ranking and, to a lesser extent, presenting search results, many search engines have already turned to such qualities as the number and quality of incoming links, key word density and page format. We're even starting to see

search engines that can generate an amazingly accurate description of a site based solely on its scan of the content.

So, the next time a web designer promises you “#1 search engine ranking” ask him these questions:

- ✓ *When you say my site will achieve the “#1 position” what search words are you assuming? Obviously if I search on the address of my site I’ll get #1 position in the search results!*
- ✓ *The only way you could guarantee #1 position is if you are the only person on earth with the special knowledge to manipulate search engines. Are you really that clever? And if you are, why aren’t you charging more?*
- ✓ *Google has hundreds of the world’s top software engineers working day and night improving their search algorithms to keep ahead of you. Are you really smarter than all of them? And if you are, why aren’t you charging more?*

And finally,

- ✓ *I’ll hire you but I won’t pay you until after my site comes up in the #1 position when using search words of my choosing!*

No one can guarantee you a particular search engine ranking. Meta Tags certainly are not the silver bullet many think they are. When it comes to building a website that will attract huge numbers of visitors, there is no shortcut. Simply hire a web designer who can build you an attractive and content-rich site. If you build it, they will come.