



M: 0430 347 471

E: lisa@thewordnest.com.au

W: www.thewordnest.com.au

Tips for writing effective Meta Tags

If you have a website, it's important that you know about HTML meta tags. Here's a lo-tech explanation and some tips for writing them effectively.

Meta What?

All websites have meta tags, but not all website owners optimize them. Use them properly and they'll help you stand out in the search engine results pages. A stand out listing will drive more traffic to your site.

Behind the scenes, a meta tag is the part of your website's code that shows the search engine what your web page is about. In this way, the search engine can quickly find and list the web pages that are appropriate to any given search.

From the front end of things, meta tags are the bits of critical information that show up in search results. For instance, if you were to search for "Plumber Melbourne" you would find the following results.

The image shows three search results for 'Plumber Melbourne'. Red arrows point from text labels to specific parts of the search results:

- Meta title tag:** Points to the blue text of the first result: "Plumber Melbourne | Jims Plumbing | Best Plumber ..."
- Meta description tag:** Points to the black text snippet of the first result: "Jim's Plumbing Melbourne has plumbers servicing all areas of Vjctoria including Kew, Altona, St Kilda, Sunbury, Footscray, Caulfield, Essendon, Ringwood, ..."
- Meta keywords tag:** Points to the bolded words in the second result: "Melbourne Plumber | Transcend Plumbing"

- ⇒ The meta title is the blue text
- ⇒ The meta description is the black text that forms the search result 'snippet'
- ⇒ The meta keywords are the bolded words that describe the business/service.

When you input the text to each page of your website you'll be prompted to input the text of these tags. Leaving them blank will result in generic text being inserted by the search engine, and bland copy being read by your prospective customer. **Don't miss this copywriting opportunity!**

Meta title tag

This is the blue clickable phrase you see at the top of each entry. (It's also visible in the grey browser bar when you view the page; it's the page name when your site or blog is saved as a bookmark or favourite, and when it's shared across social media.)

If you haven't written custom meta title tags for each of your pages these will be automatically generated from your page name. This is why you'll often see tags that have 'home' in the title, or other useless information.

Your title tag plays an important role in persuading prospective customers to visit your site.

Customising your meta title tags to include relevant keywords and useful information not only replaces a bog standard generic meta title, it also assures your audience that your site fits their needs and therefore increases the likelihood of them clicking through to your site.

Google has recently increased the text size of its title tags to help it stand out from the snippet text below. If your custom title tags were written before April 2014 then they would have been written to the previous character limits – 70 characters including spaces and punctuation.

The larger font size means that the meta title tag is now shorter so you have less room to convey your message. Now you have around 60 characters to play with, but remember this will depend on the width of characters and your use of capitals. If you're using wide letters (like 'm' or 'w' rather than 'l') and CAPS, your message may now cut off at 48 characters. If you use a lot of keywords in your title, they'll be bolded and bolded characters take up more space too.

The Moz Blog has developed a natty little preview tool to help you check what your title tags will look like with Google's new formatting. Find it here at <http://moz.com/blog/new-title-tag-guidelines-preview-tool>.

Meta description tag

This is a description of your website in 2 or 3 sentences (approximately 160 characters) and the snippet of text beneath the meta title. Again, this provides a fantastic opportunity to connect with your audience and encourage them to click through to your site.

As with the meta title, you'll want to include the keywords most relevant to the page, but you also have a little more room to impress your prospect and sell your products or services. **Make this copy compelling and give your audience a great reason to click through to your site.**

In a nutshell, your meta description tag of around 160 characters should contain:

- An accurate summary of what your webpage or blog post is about
- A compelling reason to actually click the link and find out more
- A call to action

Writing optimized meta descriptions is a pretty tough gig so look at the top ranking sites in your niche to see how it's done. Alternatively, you can ask a seasoned SEO copywriter – like me – to write them for you!

Meta keywords tag

A long, long time ago (in a galaxy far, far away), the 'keywords' meta tag was a critical element for early search engines. When dodgy webmasters started stuffing keywords (often unrelated) in their meta keyword tag to drive traffic to their sites the search engines wised up quick. As a result, the major search engines no longer pay attention to meta keyword tags.

Unless a prospect is typing your web address directly into their browser, your meta tags will be your first chance to make an impression. It pays to get it right.

- ✓ Be accurate about your page content. Misleading search engines and searchers about what your web page is about is bad form.
- ✓ Entice people with a benefit. Whether it's the cheapest, newest or best, tell your prospect what they can expect to achieve from clicking through to your site.
- ✓ Include a call to action. If you have a special offer, include it in your meta tags. 'Order now to receive...' or 'Book before Dec 20th for 50% off'. If you don't have an offer, draw on verbs to drive some action.
- ✓ Put your keywords up front. Search engines pay more attention to the first few words but don't compromise readability.
- ✓ Don't waste this prime real estate on your business name. Unless your business name is the reason people will click, don't use it in the first 15 characters of your meta tag.
- ✓ Show some personality. People see hundreds of search results so make an effort to differentiate yourself.

As with the rest of your website content, you can update your meta tags at any time. If you're not confident about writing them yourself, give me a call and I'd be happy to help.

Set your business soaring – give your copy wings!

Lisa at The Word Nest
0430 347 471
lisa@thewordnest.com.au

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