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Death Of A Meta Tag

By [Danny Sullivan](#), Editor-In-Chief
October 1, 2002

Traffick.com's Andrew Goodman wrote recently in an essay about meta tags, "If somebody would just declare the end of the metatag era, full stop, it would make it easier on everyone."

I'm happy to oblige, at least in the case of the meta keywords tag. Now supported by only one major crawler-based search engine -- Inktomi -- the value of adding meta keywords tags to pages seems little worth the time. In my opinion, the meta keywords tag is dead, dead, dead. And like Andrew, good riddance, I say!

The Rise & Fall Of The Meta Keywords Tag

For those unaware, the meta keyword tag is a way to insert text into an HTML page that is not visible when the page is viewed through a browser. Some search engines have read the content of the tag and associated the words within it along with the page's regular body copy.

The first major crawler-based search engines to use the meta keywords tag were Infoseek and AltaVista. It's unclear which one provided support first, but both were offering it in early 1996. When Inktomi launched in mid-1996 through the HotBot search engine, it also provided support for the tag. Lycos did the same in mid-1997, taking support up to four out of the seven major crawlers at the time (Excite, WebCrawler and Northern Light did not provide support).

The ascendancy of the tag did not last after 1997. Experience with the tag has showed it to be a spam magnet. Some web site owners would insert misleading words about their pages or use excessive repetition of words in hopes of tricking the crawlers about relevancy. For this reason, Excite (which also owned WebCrawler) resisted added support. Lycos quietly dropped its support of the tag in 1998,

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and newer search engines such as Google and FAST never added support at all.

After Infoseek (Go.com) closed in 2000, the meta keywords tag was left with only two major supporters: AltaVista and Inktomi. Now Inktomi remains the only one, with AltaVista having dropped its support in July, the company says.

"In the past we have indexed the meta keywords tag but have found that the high incidence of keyword repetition and spam made it an unreliable indication of site content and quality. We do continue to look at this issue, and may re-include them if the perceived quality improves over time," said Jon Glick, AltaVista's director of internet search.


As for Inktomi, the search engine has no immediate plans to follow AltaVista's lead:

"The meta keywords value is just one of many factors in our ranking equation, and we've never given too much weight to it. That said, we will continue to use it as long as our relevance modeling shows that it adds value," said Ken Norton, director of product marketing for Inktomi's web search division.

I'm certainly not crying over the decline of the meta keywords tag. It's always been a confusing issue for site owners. Should I use commas between words in the tag or not? How many times can I repeat a word on the page without getting banned? If I don't list a term in the tag, does that mean my page won't show up? Those are common questions consistently raised over the years and represent time wasted worrying about a page element that a minority of crawlers supported-- and for those that did, an element that was assigned little if any ranking boost.

Indeed, my advice about the meta keywords tag for ages has been simple. For those running large web sites or short on time, don't worry about it. The stress and time involved in trying to craft a tag was not worth it, in terms of the minor benefit it might bring. It is far more important for site owners to instead concentrate on creating good title tags for key page element that has consistently shown it can help with ranking across all m

Now I can make my advice about the meta keywords tag even easier. Just don't use. Obviously, if you personally find it or believe it to be useful, keep doing so. But I save waste of time, for most people.




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How To Use HTML Meta Tags

<http://searchenginewatch.com/webmasters/meta.html>

More in-depth coverage of the three major meta tags that have been used based search engines: the meta keywords, description and robots tags. I changed the section that says do use the meta keywords tag to don't bother but if you've just read this article, then you already know this!

Image Search Faces Renewed Legal Challenge

The Search Engine Update, August 22, 2001

<http://searchenginewatch.com/sereport/01/08-images.html>

The meta robots tag also has some special provisions that can be used to indexing. This article explains more, at the end. Search Engine Watch member clickthrough on the members-edition link for in-depth coverage and examples.

An End to Metatags

Traffick.com, Sept. 4, 2002

<http://www.traffick.com/article.asp?aID=102>

<http://www.traffick.com/article.asp?aID=105>

Andrew Goodman's column on the devaluation of meta tags, which is in

Re: HTML 2.0 spec and the META element

www-html mailing list, June 12, 1994

<http://lists.w3.org/Archives/Public/www-html/1994Jun/0041.html>

And how did we end up with the three major meta tags supported by search engines anyway? I've spent far too long trying to track down the exact origins with meta tags. However, I'll tell the tale as best I can figure. It starts with this posting, though I can find about the need for adding meta data to documents. The HTML 2.0 specifications does talk about a "keywords" tag as being one option, though exactly why and for what a keywords tag was intended is not in mind that WebCrawler and Lycos were the only major crawlers operating only months old, and neither supported such a tag or were pushing the WebCrawler one for them.

HTML 3.0: Head And Related Elements

W3C, March 1995

<http://www.w3.org/MarkUp/html3/dochead.html>

Early the next year, the draft of HTML 3 included the provision of meta tags (something that was also being integrated into the final guidelines for HTML). This time, people were already looking beyond that.

Meta Tag - proposal (suggestions ???)

www-html mailing list, http://lists.w3.org/Archives/Public/www-html/1995

Here we get some more specific suggestions on how meta tags might be created.

used.

Spidering Birds Of A Feather Report

W3C Distributed Indexing/Searching Workshop, May 28-19, 1996

<http://www.w3.org/pub/WWW/Search/9605-Indexing-Workshop/ReportOutcomes/Spidering.txt>

And finally, we have some proposals come out of the W3C where the search engines themselves were involved. Definitions for the meta robots and description but the meta keywords tag was NOT defined. Indeed, at this point, AltaVis Infoseek had already posted their own independent instructions on using a meta keywords tag for their search engines (and neither required commas between

Distributed Indexing/Searching Workshop

W3C , May 28-19, 1996

<http://www.w3.org/Search/9605-Indexing-Workshop/>

Home page for the workshop where the above "Spidering Birds Of A Feather" was held. This workshop was unique in being the first and last time, to my knowledge, that representatives from the major crawler-based search engines ever got together to agree on some technical specifications that they all could share.

Notes on helping search engines index your Web site

W3C HTML 4.1 Specification, Dec. 24, 1999

<http://www.w3.org/TR/html401/appendix/notes.html#recs>

The current HTML specifications from the W3C have an appendix on coding for search engines. However, the major crawlers were not involved with creating these specifications nor do they necessarily follow them. For instance, the major crawlers do not use a language meta tag to determine a document's language -- indeed, they've never used this information is undependable, when I've queried them on it in the past. "comma-separated" keywords in a meta keywords tag have not been required by the major crawlers, and as mentioned, Inktomi is now the only one supporting them. I don't believe the use of the link element makes any difference to the crawler. The meta robots tag, as mentioned about image indexing, various major crawlers have their own variations to the tag without gaining W3C approval nor coordinating among themselves.

W3C Semantic Web

<http://www.w3.org/2001/sw/>

The Semantic Web is a visionary concept of how the web will function with a much greater interconnectedness of web pages. Yes, pages are already connected in the Semantic Web, information will flow between them as necessary and as well. Unfortunately, the portion of this future depending on human-provided information is simply not going to happen, not where the web-wide search engines are involved. Experience has consistently shown that they don't trust meta data, both because people are explicitly misleading with it while others neglect to add it or add incorrect information. Case in point -- there is a meta author tag that could be added to documents, and my HTML editor will do this automatically for me. However, if my wife sits at my computer and makes a document, I'll still be listed as the author even if she changes the settings. Many will fail to do this.

Dublin Core Metadata Initiative

<http://dublincore.org/>

Dublin Core tags are part of the Semantic Web've also been used in other No major crawler supports the tag, but intranet and enterprise software do learn more about them here.

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