

How to Use Meta Tags for Search Engine Optimization

By Herman Drost

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Statistics show that only one of every four Web Sites have Meta tags. However using these tags can give your site an advantage over other sites that do not. Meta tags enable most visitors to initially find your site from the search engines.

What are Meta Tags?

These are HTML tags that provide information that describes the content of the web pages that the visitor will be viewing. Web Site owners use this resource to control their positioning and descriptions in the search engines. Most search engines incorporate reading meta tags as part of their indexing formula.

Where to Place Meta Tags

They should go in between the head and /head tags in your html page.

Types of Meta Tags

The Doctype tag The DTD (Document Type Definition) tag precedes the opening HTML tag. It is generally the first element to be used on any page. It distinguishes the version of HTML in use from other versions of HTML and tells the browser what tags to expect when laying out the page.

```
!doctype html public "-//wc3//dtd html 4.0 transitional//en"
```

If a browser doesn't understand a tag, it just ignores it. This, in effect, renders !doctype useless. For the proponents of strict standardization, a statement like !doctype would ensure standardization. If a browser didn't recognize the statement, it could ignore the page.

META Tags and Document Identification

The syntax for the meta tag is:

```
meta name="namevalue" content="contentvalue" or  
meta http-equiv="namevalue" content="contentvalue"
```

The META tag requires the CONTENT attribute and adds either the NAME or HTTP-EQUIV attribute. These define the general information you are creating or changing in the document, and the CONTENT attribute defines the value of the general information.

HTTP-EQUIV Attribute

META HTTP-EQUIV tags are equivalent to HTTP headers. To understand headers, you must understand the process that occurs when you use a Web browser to request a document from a Web server. You request information using your browser and the Web Server receives your request via HTTP, the standard Web protocol. When the server finds the page you requested, it generates an HTTP response. The initial data in that response is called the HTTP header block. This header gives the Web browser information useful for displaying the page.

Common Examples of the HTTP-EQUIV Attribute Value Language META Tag

This is an optional tag. It declares to users the natural language of the document being indexed. Search engines which index websites based on language often read this tag to determine which language(s) is supported. This tag is particularly useful for non-english and multiple language websites.

```
meta http-equiv="content-language" content="en"
```

Content-type Tag

The Content-Type entity-header field indicates the media type of the entity-body sent to the recipient. This is an optional tag.

```
meta http-equiv="content-type" content="text/html;  
charset=windows-1252"
```

Expires META Tag

An optional tag that defines the date when the file will be considered expired in cache and a new page will be generated. Only use when your website is running a limited time event or there is a preset date when your document will no longer be valid.

```
meta http-equiv="expires" content="Tue, 04 Dec 1993 21:29:02 GMT"
```

Refresh META Tag

An optional tag used as a way to redirect or refresh users to another web page after X number of seconds.

This META tag is often used as a "bridge" page which is accessed first by users and are then redirected to another web page.

```
meta http-equiv="refresh"
content="seconds;url=http://www.website.com/index.html"
```

NAME Attribute

META tags with a NAME attribute are used for information types that do not correspond to HTTP headers.

Common Examples of the HTTP-NAME Attribute

Keyword Tag Search

Engines that support META tags will often use the keywords found on your pages as a means to categorize your website based on the search engines indexing algorithms (proprietary algorithms which index your website in search engine databases).

Ensure you choose keywords that are relevant to your site. Avoid excessive repetition as many search engines will penalize your rankings for attempting to abuse their system. Search engines give priority to the first few words in your description, so focus on your main keywords and then elaborate further by using synonyms or other related words.

```
meta name="keywords" content = "keyword1,keyword2,keyword3"
```

Keyword values are usually separated by commas. The maximum keyword allowance is 1000 characters, however, it is believed that anything over 255 characters is ignored.

Description Tag

Search engines that support META tags will often display the Description META tag along with your title in their results. When creating your META tags, make the first sentence of your description field capture the attention of a user and use the rest of the description tag to elaborate further.

```
meta name="description" content="This camping site is about outdoor camps"
```

Keep this description to no more than 25 words (maximum allowance is 150 characters). Not all search engines recognize this tag.

Conclusion

Don't let your site be one of the four web sites on the Web that do not have Meta Tags. Optimize it now, so you have a greater chance to be listed in the search engines. Getting listed, will bring more traffic which may mean more sales.

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