

Significance and Impact of Meta Tags on Search Engine Results Pages

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Abstract — Ever since the introduction in the final decade of the last century and until present, Meta Tags and their usage were the subject of contradictory opinions, primarily in terms of their impact on the websites positioning within SERP (Search Engine Results Pages). Excessive keywords usage in Meta Tags by the website creators and/or webmasters, has led to relativizing of any sense of their existence. Nevertheless, the usage of Meta Tags, as part of HTML code, aiming at better website positioning within the Search Engines, is still a dominant starting point for webmasters in creating SEO strategies. Based on the research conducted by the local companies, the present paper will document significance and impact of the Meta Tags, the errors in their implementation, to what extent the importance of meta tags is being exaggerated, as well as their real effect on improving positioning within the Search Engines.

Keywords: *Search Engine Optimization; SEO; Search Engine Results Page; SERP; Internet Marketing; Metadata; Meta Tags; Website Optimization; On-Page Factors;*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the mid 90s, Meta Tags were developed to assist with the rapid growth of web pages. The Meta Tags were defined by Search Engines and were being used to provide extra information about a web page that did not concern the user. Basic idea was to allow webmasters to describe the web page in their own words using some Meta Tags like: title, keywords, description, and that would help Search Engines better indexing those pages and have more relevant SERP (Search Engine Results Pages). Search Engines utilized them to assign page ranking as well as to display page information.

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).

'Efforts to outfox the search engines have been around since search engines first became popular in the early 1990s.

Early tricks included stuffing thousands of widely used search terms in hidden coding, called "metatags." The coding fools a search engine into identifying a site with popular words and phrases that may not actually appear on the site.' [1]

The ascendancy of the Meta Tags did not last after 1997. Meta Tags experience showed it to be a spam magnet. Problem occurred when many webmasters began to abuse the usage of Meta Tags. Many unrelated keywords were placed on their sites in the Meta tag section, causing their sites to begin appearing in search results unrelated to topics, as well as usage of excessive repetition of words in hopes of tricking the crawlers about relevancy. Eventually the major Search Engines began discontinuing the use of Meta Tags as major criteria for listing sites, and the usage of Meta Tags has evolved to a more formal method for describing a page's content and purpose.

Since their emergence during the 1990s and until present, Meta Tags and their usage have been subject to differing opinions, especially with regards to their impact on the websites' Search Engines positioning - SERP (Search Engine Results Pages). Excessive keywords usage in Meta Tags on behalf of webmasters has relativized any point of their existence. Nevertheless, Meta Tags' usage as part of HTML code and in function of a sites' better ranking within the Search Engines still represents the dominant starting point for webmasters when creating SEO strategies.

This paper presents results of the research conducted on a selected sample of companies in the tourism field in Vojvodina province. The research was based on the Meta Tags usage on the websites of these companies. The presence of Meta Tags on the websites of the companies taking part was demonstrated, provided estimates of errors in their usage, as well as the assessment of the Meta Tags importance.

II. META TAG OPTIMIZATION

Meta Tags or what are officially referred to as Metadata Elements, are information contained into the "head" area of web pages - HTML view. A typical head might look like shown in Figure 1.

As shown in this example, these are four major Meta Tags that have been used by crawler-based Search Engines: the titles, meta keywords, description and robots tags. We'll explain each of them and give some directions about their right usage and their influence on Search Engines result pages.

```

<head>
  <title>Tourist Agency in Serbia</title>
  <meta name="description" content="We are best tourist agency
  in Serbia providing high quality services, low cost trips, wonderful
  time spending, and great memories storing" />
  <meta name="keywords" content="Tourist agency in Serbia,
  tourism in Serbia, visit Serbia, Summer 2011 in Serbia" />
  <meta name="robots" content="noodp" />
</head>

```

Figure 1. Example of proper HTML head with Meta Tags

A. Meta title tag

Title tag basically is not a Meta Tag, but because of its importance, position in HTML code and its usage by Search Engines, it is often taking place as part Meta Tags and sometimes called Meta Title tag. The Meta Title tag is used to declare the title of the page and it shows the words that appear in the Title bar at the top of web browser. Usually, the Title Tag is the first element in the Head section of HTML page, followed by the Meta Description, the Meta Keywords Tags, and other Meta Tags. The Meta Title tag would normally have the same title as contained in the <TITLE></TITLE> tag, like we saw in example above. Sometimes it can be displayed as a Meta Tag in next form:

```
<META NAME="Title" CONTENT="Page Title Here">
```

but in this case it should be used with caution. "According to our testing, Yahoo! and Bing index the Meta Title tag, but its effect on the algorithm is unknown due to inconsistent test results." [2]

The maximum number of characters allowed by most Search Engines for title length varies. Google shows 69 characters (including spaces) for page title, Yahoo shows up to 72 characters (including spaces), Bing shows 65 characters (including spaces), and Ask shows 69 characters (including spaces).

[This is an Example of a Title Tag shows 69 Characters in Length
www.domainname.com](http://www.domainname.com)

Here is an example of what a snippet looks like in Google's SERPs. The content that appears here is usually taken from the Meta Description tag if relevant.

Figure 2. Example of character length displayed in Google's SERP

B. Meta description tags

The Meta description tag is a part of HTML code that allows webmasters to describe the web page in their own words, giving a short and concise summary of web page content. The Meta description tag is primarily used for telling the Search Engine what description we want associated to the page in the Search Engine's results. A description tag should have sentence structure, and should not be a list of keywords separated by commas, but should be written as an informative and interesting summary of the web page. The text in the Meta description tag is not visible on the page itself, but is often displayed in search results. A Meta description tag, in HTML code, looks like the following:

```
<META NAME="Description" CONTENT="informative
description here">
```

The words placed in this Meta Tag, are often used in the Search Engines Result Pages (SERP), just below the Title Tag as a brief description of webpage. The maximum number of characters allowed by most Search Engines for description length also varies. Google shows 156 characters (including spaces) for Meta description, Yahoo shows up to 161 Characters (Including Spaces), Bing shows up to 150 Characters (Including Spaces), but Ask.com doesn't use the Meta description tag for its results. Instead it pulls a snippet of text from the page and can commonly display around 312 characters for a description.

C. Meta keyword tag

The Meta Keywords tag should be placed in the <head> portion of the web page. The Meta keywords tag is used by webmasters to list keywords and key-phrases (two or more keywords) that define the content of webpage as a Meta Tag indexed by the Search Engine. In addition to words from the title, document body, and other areas Search Engines use keywords to properly index our site. The Meta keywords tag is typically used for synonyms and alternates of title words. The Meta keywords tag looks like the following:

```
<meta name="keywords" content=" keywords and keyword
phrases" />
```

Each Search Engine has its own limit to the number of characters in keyword list. The general advice given is not to make list longer than its needed to be. The Meta keywords should not exceed more than 255 characters. If the Meta keywords exceed 255 characters, it will be considered spam by the Search Engine. Our website may be blacklisted by the Search Engine as a spam site, because of including too many keywords.

D. Meta robots tag

Search Engines have also defined another Meta Tag known as the Meta robots tag that will allow website developers to decide whether they want the webpage to be indexed, archived, or crawled. This tag is meant to help webmasters who cannot control the robots.txt file at their sites or as an additional tool for those that do. The Meta Robots tag controls Search Engine robots on a per-page basis. It tells Robots they may traverse the page, but not index it. The meta robots tag looks similar to the below,

```
<meta name="robots" content="value">
```

The value of value will vary depending on what a webmaster wishes the crawler to do. If a webmaster doesn't want the webpage to be indexed, then value would be noindex. If the webpage is not to be placed in the Search Engines cache, then value would be noarchive. If the links on the page are not to be crawled by the Search Engine, then value would be nofollow. To use two or more of these values, each value would be separated by a comma (ex. noarchive, nofollow). There is an additional value that can be used in the "content" part of the robots meta tag; "ALL". This just means the page is available for indexing and as such, is rarely used as there is no benefit in having it in page code.

III. META TAG INFLUENCE ON E-RANKING

Basically, every Internet Web publisher wants good webpage visibility in Search Engine results so as to increase accessibility of their webpages. Unfortunately, many websites have poor visibility in search engine rankings or may not be listed at all due to various reasons. [3]

A. Meta title tag

Title tags are perhaps the most important SEO tags for any web site, and almost all crawler based Search Engines use the Title Tag to gather information about web site. That's why placing keywords in this tag is of great importance. Search Engine spiders use these Title tags as the main source for determining the web-page topic. The text included in the Title tag is also the text that will appear in SERPs as the linked title on which users will click to access our web page.

Usage of keywords in the Title tag gives the highest weight and that's why it's vitally important to target the most critical keywords in the Title tag. While using keyword phrases in the Title tag, it is important to be highly focused. The order in which they appear is of great importance. 'Ideally, keyword for the page should appear as close to the beginning of the Title as possible'. [4] Having most important keyword phrase towards the beginning of the Title tag helps display a title in bold in the SERP (Search Engines result pages). More weight comes on Title tag if same keywords are also used in page content and the meta description tag of web page. Titles need to be relevant to the page copy and the most, if not all, of the words found in the <title> tag can also be found in the page itself. Another importance is to create a unique title for every page in the site.

B. Meta description tags

1) *Positioning Figures and Tables*: All Search Engines do not give very high prominence to the meta Description tag, but they will use the information to publish on their search results page, normally displaying below the title of our site listing. This tag in most cases will not affect the ranking or indexing of web page, so should look on it as an advert for webpage.

'Google does not use this tag for ranking at all, but Yahoo! and Bing seem to make reference to it.' [5] and 'may use the meta description in the search result listings themselves, so ensure your meta description gives an accurate description of what's on the page.' [6] Even if the Search Engine doesn't count these words for ranking purposes, having the most relevant keywords means that searchers can determine exactly what the page is about, which helps them decide to swing over to our website to find what they're looking for. Well-written meta description can have a significant influence on how many clicks we get on search listing.

2) *Does Google care about meta descriptions?* "We want snippets to accurately represent the web result. We frequently prefer to display meta descriptions of pages (when available) because it gives users a clear idea of the URL's content. This directs them to good results faster and reduces the click-and-backtrack behavior that frustrates visitors and inflates web traffic metrics." [7]

Meta Description tag should include important keyword phrases and that description is often the motivating factor involved with getting our listings clicked in the search results. As in the case of Title tag, focus should be on the same keyword phrases as used in Title tag and body text, but Meta description text should not be the same as the text included in the Title tag, nor should it be the same as the first paragraph of text on a page or the teaser for the page (if it's used). Meta description text should be unique, powerful text similar to what is used in advertisements.

The most important keyword phrases should, ideally be placed at the beginning of Meta description tag, which increases chances of better rankings on some Search Engines. Each page on website should have a different and a unique Meta description tag using the keyword phrases that are relevant to that web page.

C. Meta keyword tag

The Meta Keywords tag used to be an important way to get our page listed under specific keywords under the Search Engines. Nowadays, however, major Search Engines like Google and Alta Vista ignore this tag, and the keywords tag no longer has the significance it used to have in the early days of the web. Google doesn't use the "keywords" Meta Tag in our web search ranking, which is explained on Google Webmaster Central Blog: [8]

Some Engines are still using Meta keyword tag, like Yahoo for example. "We have noticed that Yahoo still reads the keywords tag (we found this out when we put common typos into the keywords tag, and nowhere else, and the pages got indexed in Yahoo) and even a fractional amount of traffic can sometimes bring in good sales." [9]

Even those who are experienced in Search Engine optimization may decide it is no longer worth using the tags. Any Meta keywords tags we find in the site were written in the past, when the keywords tag was more important. There's no harm in leaving up existing tags we may have written, but going forward, writing new tags probably isn't worth the trouble. The Meta keywords tag is sometimes useful as a way to reinforce the terms we think a page is important for on the few crawlers that support it. But in the other hand, there are also some side effects that are not welcomed: the Meta keywords tag also exposes keywords to our competitors. Repeating a particular keyword too many times in the tag because some engines to note such things and penalize that website. Some repetition is apparently acceptable (possibly even up to three times), although excessive repetition is regarded as "spam".

D. Meta robots tag

There is no need to use variations of the Meta robots tag to help pages get indexed. They are unnecessary. By default, a crawler will try to index all web pages and will try to follow links from one page to another. Most major Search Engines support the Meta robots tag. However, the robots.txt convention of blocking indexing is more efficient, as we don't need to add tags to each and every page.

IV. RESEARCH

This research is aimed as to determine the influence of Meta Tags usage on web rating within Search Engine Results Pages (SERP). We were examining travel agencies in Vojvodina, Serbia, as representatives of the service sector, as a relatively new but the large market, and whether the companies use all opportunities provided by the Internet, their knowledge and right usage of available technologies, on example of Meta Tags usage.

Research covered a total of 66 travel agencies operating in Vojvodina. Companies that are the subject of research are mostly from cities that are the regional centers. We covered all agencies that have been available to us through authorized associations and the Internet. The number of companies covered by the survey comprises the representative sample considering total number of tourist agencies in Vojvodina.

Initial research result shows that 41 of 66 companies (62%) are maintaining their own website, and that the rest (25 companies, 38%) don't have their internet presentation or are using other websites for their promotion. Because the research should provide the website positioning within SERP, we would be considering only those companies that have their own website presentation.

A. Usage of Meta Tags on company homepages

Figure 3. demonstrates the usage of Meta Tags on the company's website homepage. As per hereinabove, we are considering only Meta Tags important for Search Engine Optimization, such as: titles, keywords and description. Chart below portraits the total number of companies in our sample that used some of mentioned Meta Tags.

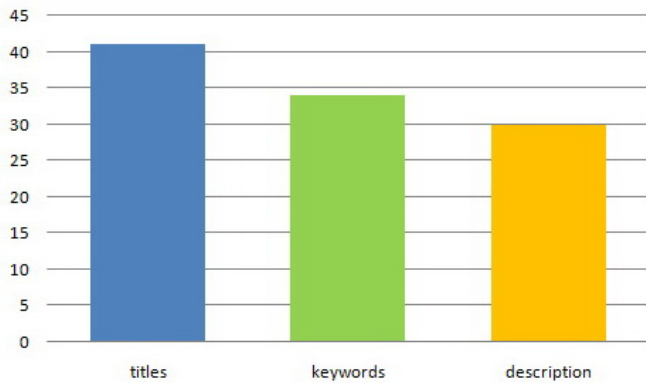


Figure 3. Number of companies that are using Meta Tags

B. Proper usage of Meta Tags

Figure 4. is showing number of characters used for each of examined Meta Tag (title, keywords, description) for each company involved. Chart demonstrates the companies' usage of Meta Tags within their SEO strategies and if they're properly optimized.

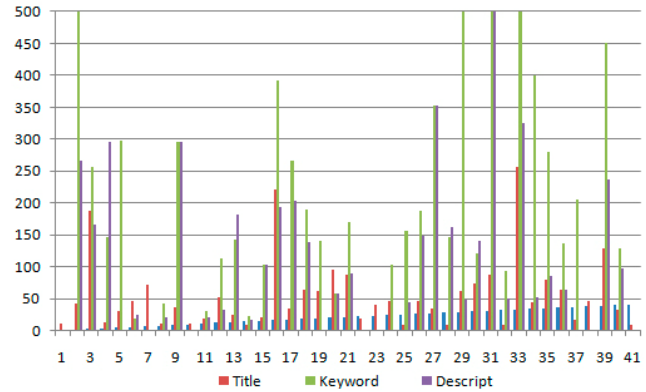


Figure 4. Number of characters used per Meta Tag by each company

C. Positions on Search Engines based on selected keywords

We examined companies' positions within Search Engines based on the following chosen keywords and phrases: "turističke agencije", "zimovanje", "turističke agencije u Novom Sadu" (or other major cities), "turistička agencija". All companies were tracked within three main Search Engines (Google, Yahoo, Bing), for each of the above keywords and phrases. Results are followed up to 300th position within Search Engine Results Pages (SERP). Empty spaces are indicating SERP position over 300.

Ključne reči			turističke agencije			zimovanje			turistička agencija novi sad*			turistička agencija		
No	Naziv domena	Mesto	G	Y	B	G	Y	B	G	Y	B	G	Y	B
1	www.astratours.co.rs	Novi Sad												
2	www.epida.co.rs	Novi Sad												
3	www.funtours.co.rs	Novi Sad	153						15	9	2	147		25
4	www.modenatravel.com	Novi Sad	116						4	51				
5	www.milotours.net	Novi Sad												
6	www.nstravel.rs	Novi Sad							36	8	38			
7	www.bonvoyage.co.rs	Novi Sad							10		101	190		
8	www.grandtours.co.rs	Novi Sad									24			
9	www.maestral.co.rs	Novi Sad	40	60		193	12		2	1	1		3	96
10	www.elnostours.rs	Novi Sad							7		32			
11	www.perlatours.net	Novi Sad							78	49	20			
12	www.globustours.co.rs	Novi Sad												
13	www.stalis.co.rs	Novi Sad												
14	www.tangotravel.rs	Novi Sad							119					
15	www.alidotravel.co.rs	Novi Sad									81			
16	www.vista.rs	Beograd	1	3	1	127	31		24		16	1	195	83
17	www.donnavista.co.rs	Novi Sad							173	61				
18	www.kompasnovisad.com	Novi Sad	99						5	2	67			
19	www.intl.rs	Novi Sad							177					
20	www.bancortours.co.rs	Novi Sad				135			86		104			
21	www.elitetravel.co.rs	Novi Sad							55		62			
22	www.arkatours.com	Novi Sad												
23	www.ecotravel.rs	Subotica							10					
24	www.luniostravel.rs	Subotica												
25	www.plustours.eu	Subotica							136	7				
26	www.caravan-travelnet.com	Zrenjanin							2	2	4			
27	www.idejatours.com	Zrenjanin	71						1	1	1		6	16
28	www.moreplus.co.rs	Zrenjanin							44	42				
29	www.prestigetour.rs	Novi Sad				90			73	43				
30	www.putopis.rs	Novi Sad							80	61				
31	www.sunnytravel.rs	Novi Sad	184			114								
32	www.drtravels.co.rs	Novi Sad												
33	www.fantasi.rs	Novi Sad								54				
34	www.markettours.wsc.rs	Novi Sad							12		21			80
35	www.avenijans.com	Novi Sad							96	4	13	106	105	
36	www.aurotravels.rs	Novi Sad							27		8			74
37	www.afictours.co.rs	Novi Sad												
38	www.proffis.rs	Subotica							21		2	113		
39	www.mazelan.rs	Novi Sad	55						5	5	3	184	5	78
40	www.rutours.net	Ruma				83								
41	www.armidatours.co.rs	Indija												

Figure 5. Companies position within SERP in three major Search Engines

V. RESULTS

Titles wise, we have recorded that as many as 22 companies (54%) put their company names as titles for the site's index page. We also have 4 companies (9,5%) using the word "welcome" or "home page" as keywords in the title, as they most certainly will not raise the rating of the site. For the 15 sites (36.5%) examined we can safely say that they did a solid job, although some are too long, or out of focus.

The keywords situation is even worse. In 83% of observed cases having the keywords entered, we recognized several problems:

- As many as 15 companies (37%) have a list of keywords and phrases in large numbers - 20 or more. Some of them have over 60 keywords and phrases. In terms of number of characters, 4 companies have more than 500 characters in their keyword Meta Tag, and two of them even over 1500. The keywords should be optimized for those keywords and phrases that we want to position, while Search Engines look at a few keywords from the first series and provide them in order of importance.
- Another problem is usage of too general keywords like "hotel", "Rent a Car", "Barcelona", "Novi Sad", "Serbia", etc. These keywords, on the one hand, have huge competition, but on the other, and much more important, they have no relevancy to website itself.

From the standpoint of good keywords usage in Meta Tags we could distinguish the eight companies (19.5%), where we can see a quality selection of keywords from the business activity point and that of the company itself.

The situation is somewhat better concerning the description; although there's still the emergence of some of the problems:

- Total of 11 companies (27%) have no description at all.
- As many as nine companies (22%) have description with only the name and address, and there is no single keyword, which certainly will not help the Search Engines to locate website.
- Five websites (12%) have listed the keywords in description Meta Tag, in most cases copied from the Meta keywords tag.

From the standpoint of good usage of the Meta description tag we could distinguish the 10 companies (24.5%), where we can see quality content descriptions from the point of business activity and the company itself.

Having the entire picture on mind, we can notice that there are no connections between the keywords and description, or the same keywords are not used in Meta Tags. This only suggests that the keyword selection was random and that there were no SEO strategy.

Figure 5. indicates that as many as 10 companies (24.5%) still do not have position in first 300 within SERP, considering all examined phrases and keywords in any of main browsers. But we also have 10 companies (24.5%) that failed to achieve a result on the first page, within the first 10 search results, for any of these phrases, and not even mention obtaining a leading position. So we have as many as five companies (12%) who managed to achieve one of the first three positions in one or more Search Engines, for some of chosen criteria.

The biggest success was scored at the local level relating to the place the respective company operates at, while the results stemming from the more general criteria are unsatisfactory.

Results provided in Figure 5. are generally not that bad, but are at the greater extent results of other SEO factors such as inbound links, age in business (and on web), etc, but there are certainly plenty of room for progress and improvement.

VI. CONCLUSION

The present paper is intended to point the attention to relevant Meta Tags' significance and influence, as well as their proper usage for website positioning within Search Engine Results Pages. Clear aim was to show the possible implementation ambiguity, and to provide the guidelines on the Meta Tags proper usage by the dedicated webmasters in order to have the website optimized for the Search Engines. Related research has indicated different SEO strategy effects on the website positioning within Search Engine Results Pages from the Meta Tags usage point of view. Further activities and research shall cover the key word optimization within the Meta Tags relating to the particular website content, supposedly producing additional synergetic effect thus abetting better website positioning within Search Engine Results Pages.

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