

OPINION

Metadata

a writing skill, not just part of the code

AS THE kids of today become the adults of tomorrow, they will take many things for granted that my generation marvelled at, such as mobile phones, MP3 players and iPods. But there are skill sets associated with these devices that kids may take for granted that are not so obvious and are something from which we could learn a lot and apply to our own online environments.

Take metadata, for example. Kids are already learning how to categorise their 3,000+ songs into nice little taxonomies that include small thesauri without even realising it. How else are they going to share their tracks with others and maintain some order to those ever-increasing playlists?

Long considered 'part of the code', metadata started out being a means to an end – a way to communicate from human to machine what was really important in your document so it could be found by a few simple keywords amongst a sea of billions of documents.

So why have we always considered metadata an afterthought? Why has this traditionally been left to coders? Isn't this one of the most important things you need to do to ensure the right audiences find the right content? I would argue that this is one of the most important things you can do make sure your content is found by your site's local search engine.

Metadata today is about more than just keywords – it's a full-blown writing skill. Search technology has improved, and the amount of content on sites has increased to the point that putting in 'products, services, widgets' isn't going to cut it. Neither is a page title like 'Bob's Widgets' that also serves as the description.

It has been my experience that authors and entire departments will slave



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over content to get the right messages, links and related information, but then leave the business of metadata to the web people who aren't familiar with the content.

Content-management systems (CMSs) also present a challenge in writing good metadata as they have allowed us to become lazy when inputting metadata,



asking for a few keywords and then using automated intelligence to crawl the rest of the document. Automated crawlers can be very useful, but the best system always has a person check the results, modifying the tool as they go along so the system can learn over time.

And if you don't have a CMS that does this, you may be at risk from the even worse cut-and-paste metadata syndrome where authors use the page template from other pages in the same category and insert their new body content, leaving identical descriptors on every page.

Well, it's time to wake up and smell the adjectives. Metadata should be a writing skill, not an afterthought, and should be taken as seriously as the content itself. How else are your users going to find anything in the sea of content that is your intranet site or document repository?

To write good metadata, you must put yourself in your users' shoes and try and understand how they search for information. Unfortunately, this is seldom the case. Crafty marketing speak is all well and good, but it is probably not what people will use to search for your content. You must write using their voice and their perspective.

Metadata today means more than keywords, page title and description. It should also include all the tricks of the trade if you want someone to find your site via Google, Yahoo! or other crawlers. And these tricks change all the time.

To get serious about metadata for external search engines, you should hire a specialist as this is a skilled, not to mention full-time, job. If you're wondering why your site doesn't rank highly on search engines, you should probably

review your metadata strategy. And if a strategy doesn't exist, then put one in place as a matter of urgency.

So, with iPods in tow, the youth of today is well prepared for the digital enterprise of tomorrow. The rest of us will have to learn that metadata is a writing skill, not an afterthought. ■

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