

## So What About Metadata?

*By Lisa Welchman*

These days, it seems that metadata is a term that is bandied about by everyone. What exactly is metadata, why would you want to have it on your Web site and what does it have to do with content management? Metadata is machine-readable information.

Metadata has a long history in the world of artificial intelligence (a field that, among other things, addresses the ability of machines to “understand” and act intelligently on metadata). There is a lot of interesting research going on about metadata and ontology (or the meaning of things), which, once sorted out to a practical level, has profound impacts on the way businesses manage their digital information.

You probably already have metadata on your Web site. It could be as simple as search keywords manually inserted by Web editors to facilitate the search process. Or, it might be information housed in a separate database which helps your business deliver customized content to individual users. Or, it could be information that your Web site’s systems administrators use to keep your business’ Web site up and running.

This article is going to discuss metadata on a more practical level. In particular, I will discuss a few ways you can use metadata on your Web site as well as a few of the metadata challenges that can arise.

### **Finding the Needle in the Haystack: Metadata and Search**

One of the simplest and most common ways to utilize metadata on your Web site is via search keywords. “Tagging” your HTML pages with meaningful keywords helps internal and external search engines perform their functions more efficiently.

We’ve all had the experience of going to a Web site, typing in a search term and then getting 400 or 4000 pages returned to us. Well-selected keywords can help organizations push the appropriate pages to the top of the pile. Also, for content heavy sites, keywords and a small bit of search engine configuration can allow you to “weight” pages. For instance, it is possible for a user to come to your site, type in the terms “custom t-shirts” and then have a specific page appear at the top of the search return list.

### **Workflow Control: Metadata and Internal Web Production**

The same metadata that helps end-users find content on your Web site can also aid Web production personnel in understanding what organization “owns” a particular piece of content.

Pretend that all content about “tennis shoes” carries the keyword “tennis\_shoe” and is owned and managed by department X, which in turn is managed by Boris Navratilova. If there is an issue about this content, a simple check of a keyword can help internal management folks know whose door to knock on when a change needs to be made or a problem solved. This can minimize those “whose page is this?” emails and allow content changes to be initiated at a supervisory, project or team lead level instead of at the coder level.

This is particularly significant for larger sites (with 50 or more Web production personnel) where you want to allow people who are supposed to code pages to actually code during their work day instead of trying to figure out what work they should be doing and responding to emails all day. Other types of content management related metadata include:

- File state (published, in editing, retired, archived, etc.)
- Publication date
- Last editor
- Expiration date
- Associated with (other files, a project, a promotion)

## **Delivering the Right Information to the Right User: Personalization**

For those businesses that are trying to deliver personalized information to their Web site visitors, metadata plays a key role. Using metadata to target specific content sets to specific users is one of the most powerful uses of metadata on a Web site. Metadata, coupled with user profiling, allows business to deliver specific content to specific types of users. In an e-commerce site, this allows business to target specific goods and services to customers they know are interested in those goods and services. In an informational Web site, it allows organizations to proactively present Web site visitors with the type of information they are interested in before the user searches for it. Personalization allows users to spend less time clicking around for goods and services or information and more time purchasing products or reading information.

### **Managing your Metadata:**

Whatever your reason for creating sets of metadata for you Web site, it's important to manage your metadata library correctly. Metadata Taxonomies (libraries) can quickly get out of hand in a business setting. Make sure that you meet with all key business stakeholders to ensure that you agree upon what specific terms mean in your business and when it's appropriate to use them.

### **Some things to think about *before* implementing a metadata strategy:**

What group in your organization is going to maintain/upgrade the metadata library after the initial implementation?

1. Who in your organization gets to determine values or meanings of terms? This can frequently be the most complex battle or puzzle to solve.
2. Are there any other well-used and/or well-maintained methods of classifying information within your business? It probably makes sense to do some research so that you don't re-invent the wheel or, worse yet, break a wheel that already exists.
3. As a Web businessperson, respect the knowledge of the business. They probably know better than the Web person the relevance or meaning of certain pieces of business information.
4. Start off small then grow. Plan for later expansion but implement your metadata strategy incrementally. There are bound to be problems or overlooked issues. Starting out small helps minimize the impact of these issues.

Creating and maintaining business metadata taxonomies takes time and effort but the power that a well-implemented metadata strategy brings to your Web site makes that task well worth the effort.

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