# Web Site Signaling: Metatags, Paid Inclusion, Cookies

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Key words aren't enough for efficient search-engine signaling. Multidimensional signaling is the way to go for Web sites that are committed to improving content quality for searchers. But making the switch requires the development of new delivery mechanisms.

Content signaling started with key word metatags and expanded into paid inclusion. Both approaches have hit serious bumps. Some Web sites, on the hunt for traffic, spoiled metatags for everyone by stuffing them with irrelevant key words and brand names. This prompted Google to disregard the tags when ranking Web pages, a policy that the company made official not long ago. Because of degradation in content quality, Google is also steering clear of having advertisers pay to include designated Web pages for various key words. Yahoo, motivated by profit concerns, announced recently that it will terminate its paid inclusion program at yearend.

Paid inclusion has failed for a simple reason. If the advertiser is paying, the service provider has to accept the advertiser's wishes at face value, irrespective of quality relevance to the associated key word. Advertisers do match Web page content with relevant key words, but over time the informational quality and relevance of pages have diminished because so much of the content has been pure advertising links on domain parking pages.

In the future, when a free cooperative mechanism is in place, the information provided by Web sites will be one variable in search result algorithms; thus, quality will not be compromised. Moreover, Web sites will have an incentive to reveal their true beliefs about key word–related quality, as they would otherwise face revenue loss and the threat of being excluded from indexing.

Web sites frequently signal quality to visitors through trust-conveying logos such as those of the Better Business Bureau (BBB) and eTrust. Companies can also signal uniqueness of content. However, although such information is valuable to search engines and can be correctly interpreted by machines, Web sites are not differentiating themselves. A signal is valuable when it stands out in a crowd.

There are signals that businesses wish to convey—industry and local awards, a site's customized look and feel, consumer ratings, and so on. But such signals are not legible to a machine. Moreover, as noted in The Future of Search Engines: Cooperation with Web Site Owners, somehow or other the type of visitor has to be known so that search engines can render the link to the most appropriate page content for the visitor.

Such multidimensional signaling to search engines requires new mechanisms. One possibility is to use a modified cookie whose information is not easily reverse-engineered by criminals. The cookie can also act, for efficiency reasons, as a central depository of potentially relevant third-party information, such as Alexa traffic, domain name history, and trademark information. ■

**Topic tags:** new top-level domain (TLD) extensions