Tag, You're It! Best Practices for Tagging on the Web

Steve Matthews | January 2010

Nearly every modern Web tool seems to employ some form of tagging. In a nutshell, tagging allows you to apply your own searchable keywords or phrases—i.e., *tags*—to Web content. You or others can then use those terms to retrieve, manage or share the tagged information. On some Web sites, the process of adding tags is as simple as clicking on an icon that says "Tag This Content." Lists of tag terms are viewable on sites in various ways, including in the form of what's called a *tag cloud*, but more on that later.

Legions of Web users have embraced tagging as a way to personally classify a sweeping range of content. They are using tags to manage collections of digital photos and Web site bookmarks, to catalog blog posts and news items, and to flag articles and all manner of other information so that it can be more easily retrieved, assembled into collections, or shared among likeminded folks. While countless Web sites now have tagging capabilities built in for their visitors, probably among the best-known and most widely used are social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Delicious, Digg and their ilk. Anyone who regularly uses these or similar Web 2.0 sites will likely be familiar with the basics of tagging.

What may be less understood, however, is *why* tags are beneficial in the first place and, in a more practical sense, *how* to select the best terms or phrases to make the tagged items findable at a later date. Let's try to shed some light on those issues here.

Breaking Down the Benefits

First, from the perspective of individual users, tagging adds value on both a personal and a granular level. Personal refers to the fact that individuals get to choose the terms that make the most logical sense to them based on their particular approach to a topic, their use of language, or how they want to assemble collections—this versus being "forced" to choose from a predefined vocabulary of terms.

Granular refers to the fact that tags, by design, should never replicate the more formal category structure of Web sites—instead, tags break down the larger categories into smaller, independent topics, or phrases, of relevance to particular users. A great analogy here resides in the difference between the *table of contents* and the *index* pages in a traditional book, where the headings in the table of contents reflect broad categories of information, while the index pages at the end list separate words or phrases related to the main headings and, thus, are akin to tags.

But tagging has a distinctively collaborative element, too. Consider how on Web sites where groups of people are adding content, tagging provides a chance to align that content with terms that are collaboratively defined. As the collective tagging, or "indexing," efforts of the group merge together,

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important concepts begin to gather in volume and help demonstrate key subsets of topics. Compared to the typical form of site navigation, which consists of broad categories that are limited in number, lists of tagging terms assembled by site users often count in the hundreds and apply concepts that would never warrant a full category under traditional classification systems.

Thus, in effect, all contributors are playing an active role in defining the classification system. The result is a user-driven, "bottom-up" approach to classifying information that is far different from the more traditional process, whereby broad formal categories of content are defined before anyone in the user community has contributed a post, an image or an article link to a site's collection. So then, what critical points can we take from all of this?

- Tags offer precision. While broad categories certainly have their uses, they also have their limits, often grouping too much information under one umbrella. Tags, in comparison, offer finding tools for getting at the most obscure topics in a particular collection.
- Tags enable collaborative classification. Any time there's more than a single person adding tags to Web content, the resulting term set shows us something about that group's interests and language use. Tags begin to reflect the most common phrases, acronyms and buzzwords being used by the group, which in turn might reflect concepts gaining in popularity.
- Tags provide an alternate form of site navigation. When tags are displayed on a Web site, they present users with an alternate method of discovering which topics are covered most frequently. Different sites treat lists of tag terms differently, sometimes displaying them in bulleted lists, often with the number of uses shown in parentheses next to each term, and sometimes in the form of a *tag cloud,* which is a more visually stylized way of showing users the most popular tags. See the figure below for an example. The font size for each term in the cloud increases based on how frequently that term is used, with the most popular terms highlighted in the largest fonts so that visitors will see them more readily.
- Tags factor into search engine indexing. Search engines cannot direct visitors to Web pages unless a term or phrase is somehow included within the document text on the site or in the underlying code. Tags, like other forms of metadata, are an opportunity to add searchable concepts to Web pages without forcing those concepts into the body of a document's text.

Forging Your Tagging Style

Given that it's a *personal* classification system, it naturally follows that there aren't many fixed rules when it comes to tagging. Consequently, you'll be given every opportunity to mess it up when selecting your keywords and phrases. Fortunately, that's perfectly acceptable because it's your use of language that needs to be represented. Still, to make your tags more user-friendly, you need to find ways to minimize the potential chaos. Here are some tips.

- First and foremost, be consistent. Your primary objective is to be as consistent as possible in applying tag terms. Before choosing terms, try to resolve some of the fundamental language issues. For example, will you use singular or plural words? Will you restrict your tags to nouns, or are verbs okay? Will you use capitalization or stick to lowercase letters? Once you develop your initial set of terms and find a preferred style, stick to it!
- Don't replicate terms. Remember, tagging is designed to fill gaps where traditional categories leave

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off. When tagging a blog post, for example, try to find terms or phrases that are relevant but not mentioned in the body of the post. Avoid repeating the same terms, or applying different stems (e.g., "-ed" or "-ing") to the same word.

- Keep them short. Some tagging systems only allow single keywords, while others let you string together short phrases. When the latter is permitted, target two- to three-word phrases as a maximum. Any longer and you greatly diminish your chances of reapplying the same tag elsewhere.
- Alter your numbers based on media vs. content. The number of tags you apply will depend on what you're classifying. With images such as digital photos, for example, there are no written words to search, so reasonably, photo or image collections deserve to have a higher number of tag terms applied. As many as 10 tags may be appropriate to convey both the content and the concepts represented by the image. By comparison, when tagging content items or links, it's best to limit the number of tags applied. This is particularly true for blog posts, so you don't replicate terms already embedded within the item. Blog posts are often well represented with two to four tags in total.
- Limit use of abbreviations. Make sure abbreviations or acronyms are recognizable by your intended audience (even if the audience is only you), and consider potential conflicts in how they'll be applied. Law librarians, for example, might avoid the tag " ALA," since in addition to being an acronym for the American Library Association, it also represents the Association of Legal Administrators.
- Tag trends, products, personal names and organizations. Think in terms of the "Five Ws"—who, what, when, where and why—or play 20 questions with yourself if you must, but identify the most recognizable elements when selecting terms.
- Consider the search engines. Niche topics have smaller audiences, and more differentiated terminology. But hand in hand with that, any time tags are applied to a public Web collection, term aggregation pages will show up in the search results and become new entry points into the collection. Selecting tags based on your audience's familiarity with the terms can be an important consideration in making your collection accessible.
- Revisit your choices. Last but not least, a periodic review of your style never hurts. A good general strategy is to let tagging happen naturally for a couple of months and then look back at the terms you've applied. If you've got 13 items tagged as "snowboard accidents" and two as "snowboard*ing* accidents," your preferred style is clear—and a small intervention may be in order to make your tags consistent going forward.

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