Google Featuring Longer Snippets: What to Do Now by @natalieannhoben

Google recently announced that longer snippets in search results, or meta descriptions, were going to be displayed.

What does this change mean? And might this impact your SEO strategy?

The Importance of the Meta Description

The meta description describes the content that is featured on a webpage.

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Best practice is to include relevant keywords in it so that it will entice users to click. (Google doesn’t use the meta description for ranking purposes.)

Since the meta description is displayed in search results, the verbiage it contains can help to persuade users to click on the result. And having a high organic click-through-rate (CTR) can indirectly influence rankings.

Google will *usually* display your meta description in search results – but not always.

Recent Snippet Length Changes

Google stated that they essentially have decided to increase the recommended length and the display length of what will be shown in the text snippet of regular organic results.

Here’s the official statement from Google:

> *“We recently made a change to provide more descriptive and useful snippets, to help people better understand how pages are relevant to their searches. This resulted in snippets becoming slightly longer, on average.”*

So, when did this all start happening? Webmasters started picking up on these changes in the SERP snippets near the end of November.

However, this change has been steadily happening for a while now. Going back to 2015, Moz reported that Google search snippets appeared to be breaking the then 155-character limit, although rarely.

Many people have recently started to notice that these changes were happening. In previous years, the recommended meta description length was 160 characters long.

According to data collected by RankRanger, search snippets can now be anywhere from 160 characters to 230 characters. What you will find more often now, is that instead of Google classically showing two or three lines for a meta description snippet, there will now be up to possibly, at times, even six lines of text displayed in search engine result pages. This depends on the query, though.

Examples of these longer featured snippets can be seen in a variety search results:

This meta description has 277 characters for the search “non-disclosure agreement”:

This description is 247 characters for the search term “chicken parmesan recipe”:

A 385-character long snippet is shown for the search term “non-compete agreement” from Wikipedia:

This 318-character long snippet is returned for the popular search term “Star Wars The Last Jedi”:

Google has even extended some snippets so long that a searcher may find the answer that they are looking for in the snippet itself, without needing to click through to a webpage to learn more.

Google has essentially updated not only the snippet length but their guidelines about it as well. Now, they are saying that there is no firm rule on how long meta descriptions need to be.

What it Means for SEO

When it comes to how this will affect SEO, though, there are a few different opinions out there.

And there are lots of questions to answer as far as how it impacts SEO:

- How does this affect writing meta descriptions heading forward?
- What happens to meta descriptions written for the previous 160-character limit?
- Do we need to rewrite all of our existing meta descriptions?
- Do we need to write longer, even more enticing, meta descriptions to convince users to click on a search result?

- Will the re-optimization of meta descriptions on key pages, such as those that receive a high amount of search traffic, be an automatic must-do?

So, should you *actually* update all of your current meta descriptions?

Most likely not.

Snippets are often dynamically generated depending on the user's query and the content found both in the meta description and the content that is visible on the page.

If Google is going to go ahead and feature a longer snippet, they will most likely pull in content from the actual page itself. And those additional words that Google chooses to add will be relevant to the user's search.

This essentially means that you can still reap the benefits of the expanded snippet without having to put in extra work.

If you need further convincing, Google's public search liaison Danny Sullivan stated that people should not "go expanding meta description tags."

Moving forward, though, when writing future meta descriptions, you can use the extra length to your advantage, depending on the type of content and your goals.

A more detailed summary of the webpage may be helpful for certain types of content.

It's also possible to use more keyword variants in a longer meta description. However, be careful to not keyword stuff meta descriptions, as these won't read well to the user (and we all know Google is all about user experience).

Use this additional space to provide valuable information for users to try to draw them into your site.

Another way to take advantage of the longer meta description is to add a call-to-action (CTA). This can further help to entice users to take action and click on your search result listing.

Additional Effects

Longer snippets will have more effects than just additional lines displayed in search engine results. These additional lines will mean that more real estate will be taken on page 1 of results.

If users are engaged with longer snippets on the first page of results, it’s probable to assume that they will be even less likely to move to Page 2 to read snippet results. This will make those Page 1 rankings even more coveted and competitive than ever before.

Ultimately, don’t waste time rewriting old meta descriptions due to this change. However, consider how SEO strategy can potentially be improved with this update to help target the users you want to get to your site.

More Google SERP Resources:

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