

---

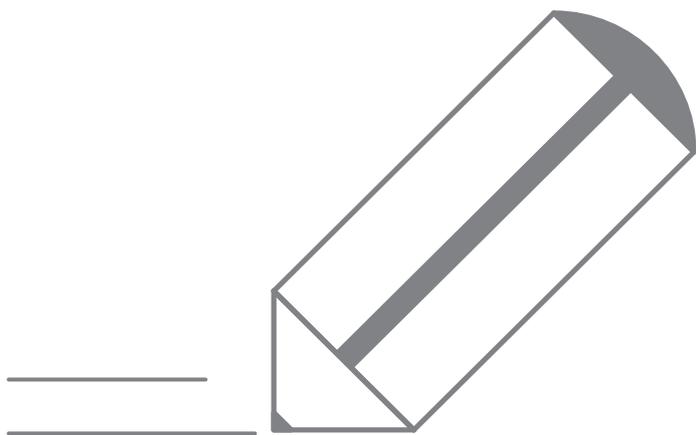
A Click Consult whitepaper

---

# 300 Characters and Beyond:

*What Do Google's Longer Meta Descriptions Mean for Marketers?*

---



# Contents

---

<b>Death of the 155 limit?</b> .....	3
<b>The study</b> .....	4
Office furniture.....	4
Motoring and car maintenance.....	4
Luxury home furnishing.....	5
Legal services.....	6
Insurance.....	7
Wedding venues.....	7
<b>Findings</b> .....	8
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	9
Writing your meta descriptions.....	9
Increasing the chances of your meta description showing in the SERPs.....	9
Keyword research.....	9
Your overall SEO strategy.....	9
Arguments against.....	10
Google has the last word... ..	10

---

# Death of the 155 limit?

The end of November 2017 saw a spike in the average length of meta descriptions showing in search engine results pages (SERPs) with Moz and Search Engine Land reporting that many snippets were exceeding 300 characters.



Search Engine Land

At Click Consult, we actually started spotting longer descriptions appearing back in 2016, but with no particular consistency (at around the same time Google removed paid search ads from the right-hand side of the SERPs), but they didn't officially roll out until December 2017.

Traditionally, Google has limited the length of meta descriptions to 155 characters but has now decided that in order to make sure a user has found a suitable page before they click; they must offer more information.

Google said: "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.

"Many results do not have the regular two rows of text anymore. Now, Google allocates three or even four rows for the snippet texts."

Unlike the meta title, a page's meta description has no direct organic search (SEO) influence. However, it can be a make-or-break deciding factor in a user's decision about whether your content is relevant to their search query and worth checking out, leading to a higher click through rate (CTR) and potentially higher quality traffic.

However well-crafted your description meta tag, there's never been any guarantee that Google will use it. The best chance has always been when the description contains the user's search term, and provides a good summary of the page. Google could show a different meta description depending on the user's search terms, to make it more relevant, pulled from the destination page.

This whitepaper explores how far Google has rolled out the expanded meta descriptions, how many sites are taking advantage of the longer character length and how marketers can use this to their advantage.

# The study

Our sample included search results for the most popular keywords in six industries - three eCommerce: office furniture; motoring and car maintenance; luxury home furnishing and three lead generation; legal services; insurance; and wedding venues.

We looked at the percentage of search results that were displaying metas over more than 200 characters in length, and the average character count where this was the case.

## Office furniture

25% of search results over 200 characters.

Of these, the average character count was 354.

In 1.6% of the results we looked at, the brand appear to have increased their metas for the keywords used in the sample, around the end of December 2017, suggesting they have optimised for the change.

Office furniture terms had the highest average meta length, so brands in this industry could be missing a trick by not optimising for the new length.

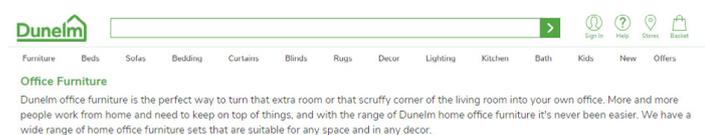
A prime example is Dunelm, who appear on page one of the SERPs for 'office desks' with a character count of 327, which is being pulled through from their on-page copy by Google, while their own meta is just 169 characters long.

### Office Furniture | Desks & Office Chairs | Dunelm

[www.dunelm.com/category/home-and-furniture/furniture/office-furniture](https://www.dunelm.com/category/home-and-furniture/furniture/office-furniture)

Dunelm office furniture is the perfect way to turn that extra room or that scruffy corner of the living room into your own office. More and more people work from home and need to keep on top of things, and with the range of Dunelm home office furniture it's never been easier. We have a wide range of home office furniture sets ...

On-page copy Google has chosen to use:



Dunelm's own meta description:

```
<meta name="description" content="Wide range of Office Furniture available to buy today at Dunelm, the UK's largest homewares and soft furnishings store. Order now for a fast home delivery or reserve in store.">
```

## Motoring and car maintenance

39% of search results over 200 characters.

Of these, the average character count was 296.

None of brands in the study had optimised their meta descriptions to the expanded limit.

Example: ATS Euromaster, with Google generating its own meta of 333 on page 1 for the term 'tyres online':

### Car Tyres | Buy Online & Fitted Locally | ATS Euromaster

<https://www.atseuromaster.co.uk/consumer/tyres/type/car-tyres>

Finding the right tyres for your car couldn't be easier, just put your tyres' size into the tool above to see the full range of tyres available for your vehicle. Tyre fitting is included in the price when you buy from ATS Euromaster, so when you book online the price you see is exactly what you'll pay when you visit us in centre to ...

Their own meta, which Google is choosing not to show:

```
<meta http-equiv="Content-Type" content="text/html; charset=utf-8">
<title>Car Tyres | Buy Online & Fitted Locally | ATS Euromaster</title>
<meta name="description" content="Find the right tyres for your car including premium, budget and all-weather tyres in a variety of sizes and speeds. Book online & fit in-centre.">
```

## Luxury home furnishing

36% of search results over 200 characters.

Of these, the average character count was 286.

This sector appears more receptive to optimise for the new length; 5.4% have increased their metas for the keywords sampled to take advantage, most notably Kelly Hoppen for the term 'luxury bedding.' Checking back on the site's meta for the same page pre December 2017 (using Wayback Machine) reveals much shorter descriptions:

Kelly Hoppen.

### Luxury Bedding - Kelly Hoppen

<https://www.kellyhoppen.com/luxury-bedding> ▼

Free

Combine Taupe and White to create a harmonious bedroom look, for inspiration, head to Kelly Hoppen London for her take on the Luxury Bedding look with taupe and white. FREE delivery on orders over £50\*

New meta being shown by Google (201 characters):

```
<meta name="description" content="Combine Taupe and White to create a harmonious bedroom look, for inspiration, head to Kelly Hoppen London for her take on the Luxury Bedding look with taupe and white. FREE delivery on orders over £50*">
```

Previous meta is 145 characters (September 2017)

```
<meta name="description" content="Refresh your bedroom with luxury bedding and soft bedroom furnishings from Kelly Hoppen London. Shop bed linen, bedspreads, cushions and furniture.">
```

Woods Fine Linens:

### Luxury Bedding | Luxury Bed Linen | Woods Fine Linens

<https://www.woodsfinelinens.com/luxury-bedding/> ▼

Item 1 - 16 of 172 - Woods Fine Linens is proud to offer one of the most comprehensive ranges of luxury bedding in the world. Browse our collections today. Woods Fine Linens - The Home of Fine Linens Since 1895.

When it comes to the term 'home furnishing accessories,' Google's choice of copy to display seems to home in on specific types of accessory, as well as the key terms itself. This is perhaps evidence of Google's focus on semantic search ad user intent, and could serve as a guide to the type of descriptive copy that Google likes to display. For example:

### Decor | Dunelm

[www.dunelm.com/category/home-and-furniture/home-furnishings](http://www.dunelm.com/category/home-and-furniture/home-furnishings) ▼

Home accessories are not just a great way to express yourself and a simple way of changing the look of your room in a fast and cost effective way. Soft furnishings like blankets and throws can change the colour of your couch as well as adding comfort and warmth, just as a patterned draught excluder can look adorable as it ...

### Home Accessories & Décor | Debenhams

[www.debenhams.com](http://www.debenhams.com) > Home ▼

Available in an array of different styles and sizes, display all your treasured memories with our stunning range of photo frames. Shop all photo frames · Vases & bowls. Add interest to any room with our range of vases and bowls, perfect whether filled with flowers or standing alone. Shop all vases & bowls · home accessories ...

The examples above demonstrate that Google seems to prefer detailed, descriptive copy. Here are some further examples for the term 'king size bedding':

### Kingsize Duvet cover sets | Argos

[www.argos.co.uk](http://www.argos.co.uk) > Home and garden > Bedding > Duvet cover sets ▼

Products 1 - 30 of 254 - Nothing beats fresh bedding when you jump into bed, except new fresh bedding! Our range of bedding sets come in a range of sizes from single right up to super king duvet cover sets, so whichever size you need we're guaranteed to have a funky duvet set for you. Add a touch of sophistication to your ...

### Cheap King Size Duvet Sets at B&M

<https://www.bmstores.co.uk/products/home-and-.../bedding/.../king-duvet-set...> ▼

King sized bed covers can be hard to come by, luckily B&M has a large range of cheap king duvet covers available. ... At B&M we treat you like royalty, which means you'll find bedding fit for a king in our stores. Enjoy the luxury of our royal king size duvet covers and bedding sets without the princely sums. 1; 2; 3; >. Sort.

## Legal services

52% of search results over 200 characters (the highest proportion of all the sectors).

Of these, the average character count was 312.

11.5% of the results appear to have been optimised for the expanded character limit – much higher than the sectors we’ve previously looked at. Is it a coincidence that it’s also one of the most competitive?

Interestingly, we also found some examples of results where the brand has optimised for the new character limit, but Google has chosen to display different copy. In a search for ‘family law’, Google shows the following for 174 Law:

### 174 Law: Home

[174law.co.uk/](https://www.174law.co.uk/) ▼

Our team are committed to excellence and exceptional results. Our People. Isn't it time you had 174 Law on your side? What our clients say. Thank YOU for all your help, advice and patience. Selling the family home of 80 years was never going to be easy but your help has been invaluable. R Mulheim. What our clients say.

[Our People](#) · [About Us](#) · [Family Mediation](#) · [Conveyancing Services](#)

The firm changed to a longer meta between September and December 2017, but didn’t include the word ‘family’, which probably explains why it wasn’t shown by Google. It also trails off with an ellipsis, which suggests it hasn’t been optimised with much thought to anything other than length:

```
<meta property="og:description" content="174 Law Solicitors are a modern and progressive firm of solicitors Collaborating is vital at 174 Law. That's because together our strength is greater. We link and support each other to create a unique centre of excellence to offer our clients the best cost-effective solutions. We prefer not to work for you, but in partnership ...">
```

National Accident Helpline’s (NAH) result for ‘personal injury’ differs from its own, lengthened meta, but Google again chooses to lift copy from the landing page, even though the new meta contains the search term.

NAH's meta:

```
<title>Personal injury claim experts | National Accident Helpline</title>
<meta name="description" content="“Personal injury claim” is a broad term used to describe a lot of different types of accidents but simply put, a personal injury claim is a legal case you can start if you’ve been injured in an accident and it wasn’t your fault. It’s the process of recovering compensation from the party responsible for your injury.”>
```

What Google shows for that page in the SERPs:

### Personal injury claim experts | National Accident Helpline

<https://www.national-accident-helpline.co.uk/personal-injury-claims.html> ▼

★★★★★ Rating: 9.2/10 - 7,933 reviews

A personal injury claim is a legal case you can start if you’ve been injured in an accident and it wasn’t your fault. It’s the process of recovering compensation from the party responsible for your injury.

Typically, an injury claim can be started when you or a loved one has been injured in an accident that Happened within the ...

Why? It could be the case that Google hasn’t crawled the URL since the meta was updated. Or perhaps Google judged the meta written by NAH (which focuses on defining the term ‘personal injury’) not to have matched user intent as closely as the one it’s actually displaying (which explains more readily the circumstances and process of starting a claim).

The former could be categorised as informational (‘know’), with the latter more transactional (‘do’) and Google could be recognising that most people search for this term with the intention of taking some kind of action (ie, pursuing a claim) and therefore displaying the meta description it feels is more relevant.

## Insurance

41% of search results over 200 characters.

Of these, the average character count was 292.

34% of the results have been optimised – by far the highest percentage of all the sectors we looked at.

Money Supermarket and Go Compare, two of the market leaders, are leading by example. Both updated their metas for key search terms to take advantage of the expanded character length, showing they've got their finger on the SEO pulse:

Money Supermarket in the SERPs for 'travel insurance':

[Compare Holiday & Travel Insurance from £4.07 | MoneySuperMarket](https://www.moneysupermarket.com/travel-insurance/)

<https://www.moneysupermarket.com/travel-insurance/>

★★★★★ Rating: 4.5 - 1,268 reviews

We search over 40+ insurance brands so you can compare over 265+ holiday & travel insurance policies. Prices start from as little as £4.07, compare everything from single trip to 12-month multi-trip travel policies & even pre-existing medical conditions. Get a quote today.

[Worldwide travel insurance](#) · [Family Travel Insurance](#) · [Travel insurance guide](#)

Money Supermarket's meta description:

```
<meta name="description" content="We search over 40+ insurance brands so you can compare over 265+ holiday & travel insurance policies. Prices start from as little as £4.07, compare everything from single trip to 12-month multi-trip travel policies & even pre-existing medical conditions. Get a quote today.">
```

Money Supermarket's meta description from September 2017 (then optimised for the previous character count of 155):

```
<meta name="description" content="Compare holiday and travel insurance from as little as £4.89. MoneySuperMarket compares 450 different policies to ensure we find the right cover for you."> == $0
```

The same for Go Compare:

Results for 'travel insurance':

[Compare Cheap Holiday & Travel Insurance at GoCompare™](https://www.gocompare.com/travel-insurance/)

[www.gocompare.com/travel-insurance/](https://www.gocompare.com/travel-insurance/)

Compare travel insurance quotes from just £4.57 at GoCompare. Whether it's a one-off trip, year-long adventure or backpacking escapade, you'll find the right cover for you. With DEFAQTO star ratings, get the right protection for you, your family or group of friends in just one search.

Corresponding, optimised meta description:

```
<meta name="description" content="Compare travel insurance quotes from just £4.57 at GoCompare. Whether it's a one-off trip, year-long adventure or backpacking escapade, you'll find the right cover for you. With DEFAQTO star ratings, get the right protection for you, your family or group of friends in just one search.">
```

Shorter meta in November 2017:

```
<meta name="description" content="Compare travel insurance quotes from just £4.57 at Gocompare.com. With DEFAQTO star ratings, you'll find the best holiday insurance cover for you."> == $0
```

## Wedding venues

30% of search results over 200 characters.

Of these, the average character count was 304; 6.5% appear to have optimised for the longer meta length.

Here, we found another example of a where a brand has optimised for the new character limit, but Google has chosen to display even more copy, taken from the landing page.

DoubleTree/Chester Hilton's new meta is 273 characters long:

```
<meta name="description" content="Celebrate your special day at this elegant wedding venue, this stunning 18th-century manor house with heritage conservatory and spa offers the perfect setting for an unforgettable Chester wedding.">
```

Their previous, shorter meta:

```
<meta name="description" content="Book direct for lower prices - DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel & Spa Chester is an 18th century manor house with full-service spa and 10 treatment rooms.">
```

What Google is displaying for 'Chester wedding' search:

[Stylish Wedding Venue in Chester - DoubleTree Chester Hotel](https://doubletree3.hilton.com/en/hotels/united-kingdom/...by...chester.../weddings.html)

[doubletree3.hilton.com/en/hotels/united-kingdom/...by...chester.../weddings.html](https://doubletree3.hilton.com/en/hotels/united-kingdom/...by...chester.../weddings.html)

Celebrate your special day at this elegant wedding venue in the heart of the English countryside.

Situated on 12 acres of landscaped gardens, this stunning 18th-century manor house with heritage conservatory, offers the perfect setting for an unforgettable Chester wedding. Allow our expert team of Wedding Coordinators to ...

This, at 322 characters, has been taken from the on-page copy (but truncated):

### WEDDINGS IN CHESTER

Celebrate your special day at this elegant wedding venue in the heart of the English countryside. Situated on 12 acres of landscaped gardens, this stunning 18th-century manor house with heritage conservatory, offers the perfect setting for an unforgettable Chester wedding.

Allow our expert team of Wedding Coordinators to take care of every detail. From arranging the room set up, to flowers, canapés and banquets, our highly skilled team will ensure your event runs smoothly.

# Findings

---

The findings suggest that Google could be moving away from a strict character count to concentrate instead on relevancy, and is continuing to show what it considers to be the best answers to satisfy a user's query. This would explain why in some cases (in the 'wedding venues' and 'legal services' categories of our study), the SERPs are showing descriptions that are different or even longer than the metas the brands have used for that page, even when they've been optimised for the new length.

## **Which sectors is Google displaying longer metas for – and does this correspond with who's taking advantage of the new limit?**

The legal service sector and insurance sector have, respectively, the highest percentage of SERPs displaying longer metas and brands who've optimised for the new length. This is what we'd expect to find as both sectors are highly competitive, and these businesses will be aware of the need to stay ahead of competitors. Both are also highly regulated so these websites will need to be updated regularly to remain compliant, offering the opportunity for more frequent optimisation.

In terms of sector type, there's not an awful lot in it: we found 41% of the results for lead gen terms were displaying expanded descriptions, versus 33% for eCommerce. But when you compare the ratio of pages manually optimised – 17.5% for lead gen search terms and just 3.5% for eCommerce search terms – the difference is huge. This suggests that there is an opportunity for sites targeting eCommerce-related terms to optimise their meta descriptions as Google has shown it's willing to display them.

## **Where the SERPs display meta descriptions of longer than 200 characters, how many are generated by Google, rather than created by the brands themselves?**

In the majority of cases, the longer metas that are displaying are being pulled through by Google from on-page copy. This reflects a potential missed opportunity for brands to take control over what users see when their site appears on the SERPs. Although meta descriptions have no direct SEO influence, they can be a huge deciding factor for users and therefore have an impact on CTR.

On this point, Moz's Rand Fishkin's view is: "Yes, it's true that Google is pulling many of the snippet texts from the web page content rather than the meta description tag. But, that doesn't invalidate meta description optimisation, it just makes the bar higher."

# Conclusions

---

This evidence strongly suggests that Google is looking more at context and intent (machine learning) than solely keywords.

If you're writing a description for a new page, you may as well take advantage of the new limit, which appears to be up to about 300 –320 characters.

## Writing your meta descriptions

The fundamentals of writing meta descriptions don't change with the expanded meta description allowance. Get your USPs and CTAs in. Think of it like writing an advert, enticing the reader to want to know more. However, you have an opportunity to answer users' queries in more depth. If you can put the term into context and provide value in the meta description, even better (even though there's still no guarantee Google will use it).

## Increasing the chances of your meta description showing in the SERPs

To create longer metas that will appeal to Google.:

- Be perceived as relevant by Google, which means it uses text and content that Google's systems will associate with solving the query.
- Be the right length, which means Google can pull it and display it in the SERPs effectively (too short or too long may cause issues here).
- Employ words and phrases that Google (and searchers) want to see in the form of phrases/sentences that tackle the core of what searchers are seeking from the result, an appropriately descriptive and interesting manner (ie, no keyword stuffing).

We also recommend optimising your metas no more than every six to 12 months.

## Keyword research

Again, the basic principles apply.

Thorough keyword research is needed to identify the keywords for which you want to rank for each page, as well as the on-page content you want the user to see when they click on your link. Speaking of pages, use Google Search Console or Google Analytics, look at the phrases people are using to find a page, and consider enhancing your on-page content on the page, as well as the meta description.

Keep an eye on your industry's metas - particularly competitors' - and ensure you're remaining competitive. Are competitive results now making yours look less substantial?

## Your overall SEO strategy

While taking advantage of the extended character limit offers new opportunities, we would still recommend putting the majority of your work into optimising SEO factors that have a direct impact on your ranking (if you aren't ranking well nobody will see your meta description anyway). Make it best practice going forward when creating new pages, and perhaps prioritise re-writing meta descriptions for your top organically ranking pages, and where there is a direct benefit to the user by doing so.

## Arguments against

It's early days and we don't know if four lines of description is more likely to make people click on your result than two did. We also don't know what drawbacks it might cause for marketers and only time will tell. But here are a few theories

Even if you write extended meta description, there is still not even a guarantee they will show it if it doesn't feel it matches the user intent (this hasn't changed). We've found that Google sometimes truncates snippets brands have created themselves, or in a few cases, disregards them altogether. You might end up with an ellipsis on the SERPs, which may not be good for CTR. However, it's always worth reviewing how well written/relevant to search terms they are.

There is the issue that answering a user's query in the search result bypasses the need for them to click through to your site (as with Google's Knowledge Graph and Instant Answers). A remedy may be to answer the user's initial question, but to offer more substance and background around their query that entices users to continue reading on your site.

As expanded metas take up more space on the SERPs, it could lead to results lower down the page seeing a lower CTR as users will have to scroll further to reach them.

## Google has the last word...

Google told Yoast.com: "While we're still actively determining new best practices, there's no harm in experimenting with this new meta description length. Pick a couple of posts and pages first. Check if Google picks up your newly written meta descriptions. Do your own testing before you go all in and change everything. These longer meta descriptions give you enough room to show people what you've got, without giving away everything your article contains, of course."

## About Click Consult

Located in North West England, Click Consult is a multi award-winning search marketing agency with a focus on organic (SEO) and paid search (PPC), with over 70 professionals employed and with a portfolio of over 60 clients from across the UK, Europe, Americas and Australia.

Click counts two Drum Search Awards, a UK Agency Award and a Northern Digital Award amongst its recent accolades, and also ranks within both RAR's and Econsultancy's 'Top 100 Digital Agencies' and Prolific North's 'Top 50 Digital Agencies'

Follow us on Google+, Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn, or to find out what Click Consult can do for you, call **0845 591 9283**.

## Our accreditations



## Our awards

