

Virgin Media Will Offer Unlimited MP3 Downloads

Frederick Lane

(newsfactor.com [1]) - Virgin Media, Britain's largest provider of broadband services, has announced it will launch an unlimited music download program later this year. The company is initially partnering with Universal Music, the world's leading music company, although other labels and are expected to sign up when more details are announced.

In return for what Virgin Media describes as "a great value monthly subscription fee," consumers will be able to download as much music as they like. All of the MP3 downloads will be DRM-free, which means consumers will be able to play them indefinitely on whatever device they choose.

No estimate was provided for the possible cost of the service. However, Virgin Media did say an entry-level subscription would be available for consumers who want to download some music but who don't need unlimited access.

"In terms of both convenience and value," Virgin Media CEO Neil Berkett said, "our new music service will be superior to anything that's available online today and provides a fair deal for both consumers and artists. There is no better example of Virgin Media's commitment to harnessing digital technology to give customers what they want, when they want and how they want."

Reducing Piracy

One of the goals of the program, Virgin said, is to bring about "a material reduction" in the piracy of Universal Music

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content across Virgin Media's network. The initial step will be to educate (or presumably remind) consumers that music piracy is illegal, and to promote the availability of a legal low-cost alternative.

If those steps are insufficient, then Virgin Media will implement a "graduated response system" for persistent music pirates. Ultimately, the company said, continued piracy could result in temporary suspension of Internet access. The company made it clear, however, that no one will permanently lose their Internet access, and the company will not monitor customer traffic to detect music pirates.

It remains to be seen whether anything can diminish the pirating of music -- an estimated 95 percent of all downloads are illegal violations of copyright.

The Future of Music

Regardless of its impact on piracy, the offer of what is being described as "the world's first unlimited downloadable online music subscription service" is yet another sign that the physical delivery of music is rapidly nearing its end. Lucian Grainge, chairman and CEO of Universal Music Group International, clearly agrees.

"Britain has a world-class reputation for artists and music," Grainge said. "Now British consumers will have access to a world-class digital music service. I believe this puts all of us at the forefront of a new era."

Even given the tremendous amount of music piracy that occurs, legitimate digital downloads of music accounted for \$3.7 billion in sales last year -- a figure that could rise substantially if Virgin Media and its partners offer a wide-ranging and easy-to-use music service.

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