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Virgin and Universal announce all-you-can-eat MP3 downloads

In return Virgin promises to cut-off filesharers

by Duncan Geere published on 15 June 2009

Music lovers are cautiously eyeing up a deal that's just been announced between Universal Music Group and Virgin Media. The former's catalogue is going to be available DRM-free to Virgin's customers for a monthly subscription fee.



The fee hasn't been announced, but it's been pegged at the price of "a couple of albums a month", presumably around £20. Downloaded music will be available for the customer to keep and do whatever they like with... except put it on a filesharing network.



Anyone accused as being a filesharer will be cut off from the network, with "temporary suspension" being employed for those accused of sharing copyrighted content, along with a series of "educational measures".

There's also an "entry-level" subscription choice that'll not offer an unlimited download option, but will presumably be cheaper. The company says that it aims to launch "before Christmas".

Analysts have warned consumers that this subscription will only give them access to content from one label, only Universal's artists will be accessible. It's possible that other content will be available in the future, but by no means guaranteed, and will almost certainly involve a rise in subscription fees.

The deal is a blow for both Sky and eMusic, both of whom have been trying to strike a deal with major labels for a music download service. eMusic has signed up Sony but faced consumer backlash when they hiked their subscription fees to compensate. Sky has signed a deal with Universal, but a fleshed-out offering has yet to arrive on the market.

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Meanwhile, consumers have been voting with their feet. Streaming service Spotify, which is free and has content from all the majors and thousands of independent labels, is growing at a very rapid rate. Virgin's service will have to be extremely attractive to compete with legal Spotify and the less-legal Pirate Bay.