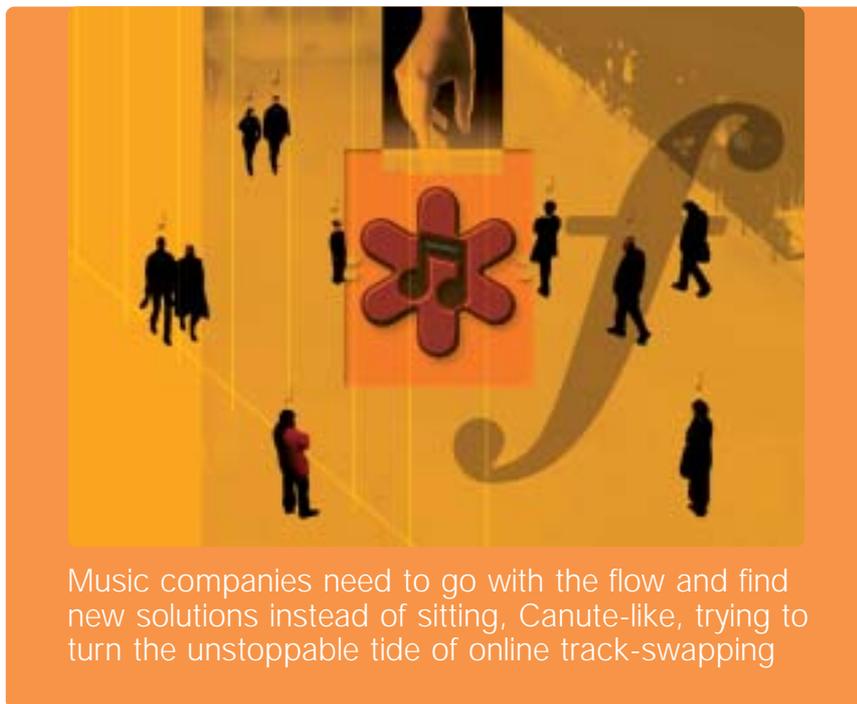


welcome



Music companies need to go with the flow and find new solutions instead of sitting, Canute-like, trying to turn the unstoppable tide of online track-swapping

Online music is a mess. But music is easily digitised, so arranging for its online distribution should be simple. Technically, it is. The current shambles has nothing to do with technology and everything to do with the outdated practices of the record labels. Before you reach for your email (or, if your work for a record label, your lawyer) and accuse me of condoning piracy, please read all the way to the end of the page – I am not.

Downloading copyrighted material without paying for it is wrong. So is sitting on your corporate arse, ringfencing your bloated profits with legal eagles instead of taking advantage of a technology that your customers demand to use and will benefit those whose interests you are supposed to represent. Sadly only the former is against the law.

The record labels claim they face an historically unprecedented threat. Rubbish. When technology changes more rapidly than the legal and societal structures it affects, conflict inevitably results. But progress is made. Scholars of modern history will recognise this was predicted by Marx and Engel.

But while other industries have adapted the supply chain to account for changes wrought by the internet, the record labels seem stubbornly to refuse to co-operate in legitimising the online distribution of music.

Consequently, online music is a mess. Legitimate sites are not global or offer a mishmash of music to which different rules apply: some tracks you can download for a limited period only; some you can burn to CD; some you can't. Meanwhile the pirates flourish. And do the record labels question their own culture of lawyers, leather sofas and loadsa coke? Nope They sue individual music downloaders. Doh!

The police in this country learned years ago that prosecuting individuals for certain types of crime is a waste of their time. For example: weekend fights used to be a common occurrence outside a certain city-centre takeaway after pub closing hours while pissed-up patrons waited for their pizza. Instead of posting a uniformed officer outside the takeaway to keep law and order, the police posted the takeaway's phone number in all the local pubs. No waiting, no fights.

Similarly the record companies need to be tough on the causes of crime, not just tough on crime. To find the causes they need look no further than their own reluctance to adapt. ■

Andrew Charlesworth, editor

reader information

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Visioneer 4800 scanner: Mr J Sharp, Essex; Mr P Ludmon, Essex; Mr C Smith, Bristol; Mr V McDowell, Brighton; Mr J Hayes, Sussex; Mr F Whittaker, Cheshire.

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