APPLE is to launch a European version of its online music download service iTunes next week in a move likely to spur sales of its popular iPod MP3 player and hit struggling competitors, technology and other publications reported. Up to now, iTunes has been only available in North America, where users pay $US99c ($1.40) per song downloaded into their Apple or Windows-equipped computer.

The music can then be listened to on a stereo, copied it to a CD or transferred it to the pocket-sized iPod, whose sales have skyrocketed in step with iTunes's popularity.

The roll-out in Europe, reported to be set for June 15, would extend Apple's lead in online music sales and provide a source for legal downloads of music - something that has been largely absent in this part of the world up to now, mainly because of differing national European laws governing music use and royalties.

Traditional music recording companies in Europe, as elsewhere, have been hard-hit by decreasing music sales in stores which they blame on illegal copying of music through peer-to-peer services on the internet.

In the United States, iTunes has been available for over a year now, during which time more than 70 million songs have been downloaded.

Apple has said it makes little profit directly from the service, but its sales of iPods more than make up for that. The player - the only one that can be used with iTunes - represents nearly half of all MP3 player sales in the United States, Japan and Europe, according to the company.

Several publications, both online and in print, said Apple has scheduled a London media conference next Tuesday to announce the launch of iTunes Europe.

"In general, Apple products are available from the moment their launch is announced, which suggests that the service could be accessible to European consumers from next week," one French internet review, Multimedia a la Une, wrote.

A British tabloid, The Mirror, took a pessimistic angle, asking whether iTunes "could spell doom for record stores".

It said tracks, in Britain anyway, were expected to sell for 86 pence ($2.25) and quoted an unidentified music industry insider as saying: "Consumers want their entertainment immediately, they don't want to go to the shops and physically own all their music."

Reports noted that Napster, a rival service, has already been operational since last month in Britain but was unlikely to win a market tussle with Apple's more popular offering.

Sony and other companies are also looking to start European music services within weeks.

Agence France-Presse

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