FRANKFURT, Germany - Acknowledging its proprietary audio technology was a marketplace flop, Sony Corp. is shutting its Connect digital music store and will open its portable media players to other formats.

The moves were announced Thursday at a Berlin consumer electronics trade fair as the Japanese electronics pioneer unveiled a pair of new digital Walkmans that can play the Windows Media Audio, MP3 and AAC audio formats.

Like rivals' players, including Apple Inc.'s iPods, Sony's NWZ-A810 and NWZ-S610 can play video and display photographs. Sony's models include an FM tuner, too.

Sony said it would phase out operations of its struggling Connect online store, which sold songs in the company's proprietary ATRAC format.

"This gives customers greater flexibility in their music software approach," the company said in a statement. "As a result, Sony will be phasing out the Connect Music Services based on Sony's ATRAC audio format in North America and Europe."

Sony spokesman Linda Barger said the new Walkman players will no longer directly support ATRAC.

"We are offering conversion software to convert ripped non-secure ATRAC files to MP3," she said in an e-mail.

In a message sent to Connect users, the service said it would not close before March 2008, but it did not set a more specific date. The company's Connect e-book service for the Sony Reader are not affected.

In June, Sony Connect Inc. said it was eliminating some positions as part of a restructuring plan to shift resources to other online services, but had denied reports it
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Sony to unplug Connect music service

was related to a planned shutdown.

Instead, the company said it was shifting its emphasis other network services, specifically one for users of the PlayStation video game console, the company said.

Sony Connect launched in 2004, but like other online music services, it has had a tough time competing against Apple Inc.’s iTunes Store, which is tied to the market-leading iPod portable player.

The new Walkman video players store up to 1,850 average-length MP3 songs on the eight gigabyte models, 925 songs on the four gigabyte models, and 440 songs on the two gigabyte models. Prices range from $120 to $230.

Additionally, a third line, the NWZ-B100, will play audio only (MP3s, AAC and Windows Media formats), and cost $80 for a two-gigabyte model and $60 for a one-gigabyte model.

Sony said that the new Walkman video players will ship with Microsoft Corp.’s Windows Media Player 11 to manage digital libraries.

"With this initiative, Sony is debuting an important option for digital media players as it opens new doors for a rich digital experience," said Dave Wascha, director of Windows Client Product Management at Microsoft Corp.

On the Net:

Sony Connect: http://www.connect.com

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