Worker Commits Suicide Over Missing iPhone

William Foreman, Associated Press Writer

GUANGZHOU, China (AP) — Chinese worker Sun Danyong was responsible for handling the prototypes of one of the world's hottest products — the iPhone. When one of the gadgets went missing and his company began investigating him, he jumped off his apartment building and killed himself.

The death — which involves allegations that security guards roughed up the worker — prompted Apple Inc. on Wednesday to issue a terse statement, insisting that all the company's contractors must treat workers with respect and dignity.

The 25-year-old Sun started his new job last year after earning a degree in business management. He moved from his native Yunnan province — a poor region sharing a border with Myanmar — to the southern boomtown of Shenzhen, home to the sprawling factory complex run by Foxconn Technology Group. The Taiwanese manufacturer has long been one of Apple's key suppliers.

Sun's job involved shipping iPhone prototypes to Apple. It was an extremely sensitive position for a company like Apple, known for shrouding its new product launches in secrecy and suspense — a strategy that's consistently helped whip up the just-can't-wait-to-buy-it feeling among consumers worldwide.

Although Apple and Foxconn confirmed Sun's suicide, they would not provide much information about the circumstances of his death. Many details have been reported by the state-run Southern Metropolis Daily, one of the region's most popular and aggressive newspapers.

The paper's account, which hasn't been disputed by the companies, said: Sun reported on July 13 that he was missing one of the 16 fourth-generation iPhones in his possession. Foxconn security guards searched his apartment, detained him and beat him. In the early morning of July 16, a distraught Sun jumped from the 12th floor of his apartment building.

Jill Tan, an Apple spokeswoman in Hong Kong, issued only a brief statement about the incident.

"We are saddened by the tragic loss of this young employee, and we are awaiting results of the investigations into his death," Tan said. "We require our suppliers to treat all workers with dignity and respect."

Apple's success amid the recession is due in part to the iPhone. More than 5.2 million of the devices were sold in the third quarter this year — seven times the number sold at the same time last year, the company said Tuesday when announcing its earnings. The sales spike was related to a newly released version of the device, it said.

The Cupertino, Calif.-based company's earnings jumped 15 percent in the third quarter — growth largely propelled by laptop and iPhone sales.

One of Apple's most important manufacturing partners has long been Foxconn, owned by Taiwan's Hon Hai Precision Industry Co. — the world's biggest contract manufacturer of electronics. The corporate behemoth has also produced computers for Hewlett-Packard Co., PlayStation game consoles for Sony Corp. and mobile phones for Nokia Corp.

Foxconn executive Li Jinming said in a statement that Sun's death showed that the company needed to do a better job helping its employees with psychological pressures.

"Sun Danyong graduated from a good school. He joined the company in 2008. He had an extremely bright future. The group and I feel deep pain and regret when a young person dies like this."

The company also said its security chief has been suspended and turned over to the police.

The police declined to respond to questions from The Associated Press.

Foxconn's security chief, Gu Qinming, was quoted by the Southern Metropolis Daily as saying he never hit Sun. Gu reportedly said that after three security personnel searched Sun's apartment and did not find the phone, the employee followed orders to go to Gu's office on July 15.

"I got a bit agitated. I pointed my finger at him and said that he was trying to shift the blame," Gu was quoted as saying.

He added, "I was a little angry and I pulled his right shoulder once to get him to tell me what happened. It (the beating) couldn't have happened," the paper reported.

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