



Tech Review: zBoost Cell Phone Signal Booster

CELLPHONE BOOSTER, JULY 5, 2012 BY: JAMES HANNIBAL

Don't you just hate it when you can't get good cellphone coverage? I know I do. I am always surprised by how certain locations in homes are total dead zones. This is where dual band cellphone repeaters like the zBoost SOHO YX545 Cell Phone Booster by Wi-Ex can really come in handy. There are several companies on the market that make cellphone repeaters, but as far as I can tell, only zBoost offers such a wide variety of repeater base stations and antenna options that are effective in all kinds of environments.

The zBoost SOHO YX545 is compatible with cellphones and data cards that utilize the 800/1900 MHz frequency bands. This includes the following cellphone service providers: AT&T, Verizon, Sprint, T-Mobile, Metro PCS, Virgin Mobile, TracFone Wireless, U.S. Cellular, and Cricket Wireless. However, it will not work with the following systems: Nextel/iDEN or 4G, and 2100MHz phones. Fortunately, this statement is partially misleading. 4G and/or 2100MHz cellphones are backward compatible with the previous generation 800/1900 MHz cell towers, which are still very widespread and will remain so for some time to come. This means that your 4G cellphone will default to its 800/1900 MHz band when operating through any of the zBoost products. There are some devices, however, that will not be compatible at all. For example, many 4G and WiMAX hotspots are not backwards compatible with 800/1900 MHz cell towers and therefore would not be compatible with any zBoost products as of the publishing of this article. Be sure to first do a little research on your wireless modem and make sure they can operate of 800/1900 MHz.

During testing, I found that when comparing data speed with and without the zBoost, there was a noticeable data speed drop when utilizing the zBoost with my iPhone 4S. When compared to utilizing the zBoost with my iPhone 4S with full bars, my iPhone 4S displayed significantly faster data speed test results with only 2 signal bars with the zBoost turned off. Signal strength went from 3 bars to 5 bars and call quality definitely improved when using the zBoost. If I had to guess, I would say that the data speed drop was due to the zBoost forcing my iPhone to use 3G instead of 4G. When I discussed this with Wi-Ex at Macworld 2012, they told me that they were working on a 4G & 2100MHz compatible model. So, keep an eye out on their homepage for a 4G compatible zBoost.

In the signal strength and range testing, I found that the zBoost was able to increase my iPhone 4S from 3 bars up to a full 5 bars up to 20 feet away with a direct unobstructed line of sight between the cellphone and the zBoost. Any further away than that and there was no indicated increase of signal strength. This means that the effective coverage area of my testing amounted to roughly 1,256 square feet. This seems a far cry from the manufacturers claim of up to 3,000 square feet of indoor coverage, less than half unfortunately. You might be able to come closer to that claimed figure of 3,000 sq ft. if you happen to have a second story in your home, placing the zBoost in a central location on the top of a high shelf could possibly extend its coverage upstairs through the floor. If you don't want to be disappointed with its coverage area performance, I would suggest going by my test result of 1,256 sq ft.

I found the setup process to be quite straight forward and simple. All the necessary cables, brackets, nuts, washers, and screws were included in the box along with very straightforward instructions. Just remember there has to be at least a little bit of a faint signal to boost in order for the zBoost to work. You probably won't get very positive results if you attempt to utilize it hundreds of miles away from the nearest cell tower. Even though my tested coverage area was not as large as claimed by Wi-Ex, I found this product to be exceptionally effective in medium to poor coverage areas if installed properly.

I liked this product so much that my parents now have one for their lake house, which is on the fringe of coverage. If your home or vacation cabin is semi-remote and the coverage is spotty at best inside, then a cellphone repeater might alleviate some of your dropped call woes. If you decide to start shopping for one, then I highly recommend checking out the dual band zBoost SOHO YX545 Cell Phone Booster by Wi-Ex.

Tech Specs:

- Frequencies covered: 824-849MHz, 869-894MHz, 1850-1910MHz, 1930-1990MHz
- System Gain: 60dB
- Compatible Networks: CDMA, GSM, GPRS, EDGE, EVDO, 1xRTT, UMTS, HSPA, & 3G
- Power Consumption, Power Supply: 3W standby; 7W max signal – 5VDC, 2A max, 100-240VAC
- Base Unit Size & Weight: 5"x7"x1.25" – 9oz.
- Operating Conditions: Indoor use only (40°-105°F)

Pros:

- Increases cellphone coverage in dead zones
- Less dropped calls
- Clearer audio during calls
- Works GSM & PCS carriers on 800 & 1900 MHz bands including 3G
- Effective range of about 20 feet / 1,256 sq ft
- Cellphone battery lasts longer
- Completely wireless (no cables connecting to your cellphone)
- Simple installation
- Supports multiple cellphones at the same time

Cons:

- Reduced cellular data speed on iPhone 4S
- Not compatible with 4G, Nextel/iDEN, or 2100MHz
- A bit pricey
- No option to power it from a USB port or 12v car lighter plug (Would be handy on a large boat, RV/camping trailer, or off the grid remote cabins)