



## Review | [zBoost YX545 SOHO](#)

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Rating: ★★★★★



Everything about my house that makes it a great place to live means it's a lousy spot for a cellphone. Being on the side of a hill, I have a nice view of the valley beyond. Unfortunately, the closest cell tower is on the side of the hill behind me. The appearance of our community is maintained by a large and powerful homeowners' association that would never permit anything vaguely resembling a cell tower anywhere near our borders. Located near the junction of two major freeways is handy for travelling but guarantees clogged cell channels during rush hour. Finally, my home-office/man-cave is located on the bottom floor of a split-level, giving me great southern light but a lot of earth and concrete between me and the closest tower to the north.

The end result is an iPhone that alternates between Searching... and a bar or two of signal strength. If I don't transfer a call quickly to my landline, it will almost always drop.

I spun my tale of GSM woe to the folks at the zBoost booth at Macworld and they offered to let me see if their technology could help out. Their little box contains a signal repeater/booster with its own antenna that links to an outside antenna. The idea is that if there's a better signal somewhere nearby, it will transfer it to where you need it. For home use, they have two basic styles. The Metro (XY540, \$299) is designed for single story installations where the external antenna needs to be level with the repeater. The installation is convenient, but the range is limited to 1,500 square feet. The SOHO (XY545, \$399) requires at least fifteen feet of vertical separation between the external antenna and the repeater but has a 3,000-square foot range. In my situation, getting the antenna up as high as possible would always improve the signal. The zBoost SOHO includes the base station (repeater), an external antenna with mounting hardware and 50 feet of RG59-mini antenna cable. The signal is compatible with all U.S. carriers using 800 & 1900 MHz. (This does leave out Nextel/iDEN and 4G, 2100MHz phones.)

### Testing First

Following zBoost's suggestion, I tried a mock-up installation to make sure that there was enough signal floating around for the device to actually make a difference. Running the cable up a stairwell and taping the outside antenna to an wall, I powered up the repeater and discovered that I could now keep at least a single bar of coverage and had two bars a good deal of the time. Some test calls to and from the phone proved the voice quality was quite good.

The next step was to scout out the best location for the antenna, simply a matter of trying some different locations and watching the bars on my phone. As luck would have it, a distant corner of my property provided the best reception. However the edge of the roof directly above my office worked reasonably well, too.

The ease of installation is directly proportional to your skill as a handy-person. If you rather not run a cable through an exterior wall, zBoost offers an optional (and rather pricey) extender that will let you run the cable under a closed window or you can choose one of the Metro models that doesn't have quite the reception but is great for apartment-dwellers. In my installation, I opted to suck in every bit of signal that I could.

Though it's not immediately obvious (or clearly documented) the base station's shell comes apart so it can be wall- or even ceiling-mounted. For best range, zBoost recommends that the base unit be located as centrally as possible. However, it also needs to be near a power outlet and away from possible sources of interference.

### Trying it for Real

With the installation complete, I crossed my fingers and plugged everything in. I was greeted by three solid bars of GSM goodness, though it was rush hour and a time when I would often never be able to even connect. I unplugged the zBoost and immediately returned to an occasional single bar alternating with a totally lost signal.

A number of test calls in and out worked flawlessly. Nothing dropped and the signal stayed strong. The improved signal also propagated across the upper floor of my house, providing solid reception virtually everywhere. The zBoost didn't let me capture a full 3G signal, but with Wi-Fi, that wasn't an issue for me. The zBoost will help data transmission speeds and using full size RG6 cable rather than the RG59-mini may help move the higher frequencies where the data signals live).

A review like this should always carry the caveat that "your mileage may vary," the zBoost still can't make something out of nothing. But if you're in a place that requires good timing and a bit of luck to complete a call, the zBoost should get you out of the fringe and into the mainstream.

#### ▶ Product information

#### ▶ [System requirements](#)

Product:	<b>zBoost XY545 SOHO</b>
Made by:	<a href="#">Wi-Ex</a>
Pros:	If there's a signal available, it does the job; totally plug-and-play; signal is clear, strong and solid (no coloration apparent)
Cons:	Depending on your skills, external antenna installation may be a challenge
Price:	<b>399 Dollars</b>
Rating:	★★★★★