Hands-on Review: zBoost Cell Phone Booster

Sun Nov 26, 2006 10:30AM EST

Can bringing good cell service into a "dead zone" home catapult a product into the top 10 for this year's Last Gadget Standing? Take a look at what makes this Wi-Ex cell booster tick and see what you think.

Most cellular systems were built for highways and the great outdoors. The signals degrade indoors; building materials and walls compound the problem. The zBoost extender takes the outside signal and amplifies it inside your home.

In my NYC apartment on any given day, you see half the residents hovering by their windows, mining for a good signal. The zBoost Dual Band lets me leave my window and head into the recesses of my apartment. The unit (I used model number YX510) includes a base station that the company advises you to place in an area where you receive a phone signal—even minimally. It also includes a tube-shaped antenna that's slightly longer than a paper towel roll. You position the antenna at a window or, for even better reception, outside your home. The base station and antenna are connected by a coaxial cable.

The setup took me all of two minutes. The base station blinked green immediately, and the bars on my T-Mobile phone went from one to four (out of a possible five) to indicate a healthy signal. And the service was consistently better throughout my apartment, though it dropped off the farther I got from the base station. The only problem is the eyesore of a coax cable. You'll need to do some molding work to dress it if you're going to make the zBoost a full-time friend.

zBoost supports both 800MHz (cellular) and 1,900MHz (PCS) phones. According to the manufacturer, the only carrier that's not supported is Nextel. Also, though I didn't try it in a basement room, the company tells me it will work fine as long as the antenna gets a signal it can amplify. While $400 is not inexpensive, you can safely consider ditching your landline, and it's a lot more convenient than leaving home every time you want to make a call.