

Q&A with Hongtao Zhan, CEO of SureCall providing Cell Phone Signal Boosters that support 2G, 3G, and 4G Signals Inside Buildings, Cars, Boats, and Recreational Vehicles for Connecting Anywhere and Everywhere



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CEOCFO: *Mr. Zhan, would you tell us about your background and how you got to this point, where you are now the CEO of SureCall?*

Mr. Zhan: My background is rather unique. I was born in Northwest China in 1968 and I learned how to write the name of Chairman Mao before learning to write my own. I had always been a curious boy, which led me to study and earn my Master's Degree from a top engineering school in China. I remember the day after Tiananmen Square when I decided would follow a destiny of my own by choosing and I set my sights on a life in the United States. After graduating, with three suit-cases and \$400 in my pocket, I took my first trip out of the country and left for California. Everything was unknown – I had no ride from the airport, no place to stay, and a contest in Los Angeles that I couldn't afford not to win, so I worked hard and won. Fast-forward to 1997 I was working in Silicon Valley as a design engineer. I always felt I was being overpaid because I loved my job so much and this part of my life was so dramatically better than my younger years. Two-years later after the internet debacle, I was working for a company that was acquired, so at the age of 32 I had become a millionaire for a few months until the stock market crashed and 9/11 happened – everything changed very quickly. At the time I was thirty-two-years-old and still single, so I started a business that later became SureCall. I had no background in business and had to learn everything – packing the boxes, shipping, sales, marketing, tech support – if the product didn't sell I didn't eat. That was very motivating. Now, sixteen years later, we are still employee owned and funded, we just celebrated our second year on the Inc. 5000, have grown 95% in the last two years, and the best days are ahead of us. It is amazing.

“Going against the grain by resisting VC-funding has given us more control over the technology and the direction of the company. We are a team of curious minds who have no limits on our ability to take care of our customers, partners, and employees, and we are often first to generate new technology that meets the needs of the changing market.”- Hongtao Zhan

CEOCFO: *How did the events at Tiananmen Square play into your coming to the United States?*

Mr. Zhan: When this happened in 1989 I was a twenty-year-old college student. I was one of the million demonstrators and it had a major impact on me. Initially I saw a truck load of PLA soldiers and even talked with some but, as you know, it ended quite violently. It was very traumatic for me. It changed a great deal of my perspectives and forced me to be more mature. In the long-run this led me to look at things very differently and guided me toward making decisions that shaped my future into what it is now.

CEOCFO: *Let us turn now to the company. What is the concept behind SureCall?*

Mr. Zhan: SureCall has a mission to connect people through secure and top-tier wireless communication.

CEOCFO: *What are you offering to allow that to happen?*

Mr. Zhan: Our flagship product line is our [cell phone signal boosters](#). Most are five-band boosters now, which support your 2G, 3G, and 4G signals inside of buildings, vehicles, boats, and recreational vehicles so you can get cell phone connection anywhere and everywhere.

CEOCFO: *Why do we still need boosters? What are the challenges for the industry?*

Mr. Zhan: That is a good question. Cell phone carriers use towers to send signal to your phone but these towers don't reach all locations. There are so many factors such as metal car frames, structural walls, hills, mountains, trees, and others that block the signals that are trying to reach your phone. Boosters allow you to capture that cell phone signal, maybe outside of your house, and boost it in a new location, such as inside of your house, to give you a strong wireless signal that won't drop calls.

CEOCFO: *Would you tell us about the range of products you offer and how and why they work?*

Mr. Zhan: SureCall offers FCC approved products that support applications for in-building, mobile, commercial, public safety, and direct connect, which you may know as machine-to-machine or the internet of things. The residential product line covers residences like homes, apartments, and small offices between 500 and 6,000 square-feet and our in-building products for industrial applications can transmit signal for commercial sites up to 100,000 square-feet. Our mobile boosters support needs for cars, trucks, boats, RVs, and fleets. Typically, these are less powerful – at most they need to cover 200 square-feet. Because they are moving they also need to adjust for different signal strengths to give the best signal no matter where the driver is. Our most specialized product supports public safety. In the US, this is a requirement for structures larger than 50,000 square-feet and rather than boosting the 2G, 3G, or 4G that most of us use, it boosts the signal in the Public-50 Band, which provides coverage for fire departments, police departments, and all other quick responders. We also have another very specialized line of products that we call direct connect boosters. These are connected directly to a machine, such as an ATM machine, a Lotto Machine, or any modem. With the Internet of things there are a great many devices that need wireless connectivity and our technology has solved for that need. With the exciting progress being made in the world we are creating new things every day. We just invented a booster that combines Wi-Fi together with the cellular signal. In addition, the whole world moving toward 5G we are expanding our line to accommodate those needs when they arrive. In the past, we have patented and pioneered a lot in our space and we will continue doing that in the future.

CEOCFO: *What is special about a SureCall product?*

Mr. Zhan: SureCall has been dedicated to the industry since 2001 and has remained completely self-funded and employee owned. Going against the grain by resisting VC-funding has given us more control over the technology and the direction of the company. We are a team of curious minds who have no limits on our ability to take care of our customers, partners, and employees, and we are often first to generate new technology that meets the needs of the changing market. There are so many things that we are proud of and that comes with every SureCall product.

CEOCFO: *What makes SureCall high quality? Is it better components, more rugged materials?*

Mr. Zhan: Good question. There are a couple of ingredients. If you are talking about manufacturing you have to start with high-quality components. We are driven by customer satisfaction, not by profits, and that means we do not compromise quality because we want to offer the signal boosters that will be best for our customers. That is deeply rooted in the hearts of every employee, whether they are producing the actual products, providing customer service, sales or marketing. As a manufacturer, you need a system where everyone shares the company's mission. We have a championship team that understands this and executes it every day. If you have high-quality people then your products can be the best.

CEOCFO: *Does being employee owned make a difference?*

Mr. Zhan: Yes, it makes a big difference. When people have ownership they also own a piece of the success. Naturally, they will care more and work harder. Their well-being, the company's well-being, and the product sent to the customer all benefit when they become one. It is very motivating.

CEOCFO: *How do people buy your products? Are they available retail? Do you work through partners? What is the selling apparatus?*

Mr. Zhan: We have a variety of channels reaching them and customers and businesses can buy our products easily. For example, if you google our company or products you will see many different retailers – large and small. We have very

close relationships we have with each of our partners and, for that reason, sell exclusively through a channel of resellers and distributors.

CEOCFO: *Is it easy for a customer to understand which product they should be using? How do the resellers help them understand what product is right for them?*

Mr. Zhan: In general, most of the people looking for a booster seek help before buying. We see quite a lot of traffic to our website and partner's websites but customers are doing more than browsing the websites. Typically, they will call a SureCall dealer to get general support, answers to questions, and figure out the best solution together. Because this is how they buy VARs are very important to us as they take close care of our customers.

CEOCFO: *Would you tell us about your Fusion2Go 2.0 product that you introduced last in July? What is new in that product?*

Mr. Zhan: There are a couple of things. The new Fusion2Go 2.0 is an upgrade to the 1.0 and some of the improvements, like strengthening the antenna magnet and decreasing the actual size of the booster, are not revolutionary. But we always listen to what our customers are saying and work that into our products. On the other hand, the 2.0 is much more powerful in terms of the transmission power and the receiving sensitivity. We have also reduced the manual adjustments to where the booster automatically calibrates itself so the customer does not have to do anything after they spend five-minutes installing it in their car. If you add all of these updates together it is amazing and gives the customer a more seamless experience. This product is a hot selling item right now and it has become an instant success because we took care of the customers.

CEOCFO: *You worked earlier this year with NASA. Their interest in you shows how far you have come. What did you do for them?*

Mr. Zhan: Yes, NASA is a big name like many of our thousands of customers. They happened to have an issue that is very similar to many of our other customers. They purchased the solution from one of our VARs and they have been very open about their love for the product and the service they have received. This is a great story and one that we could share about many of our other customers.

CEOCFO: *What have been the rewards for you as SureCall has grown and evolved?*

Mr. Zhan: What I find amazing to this day is I clearly remember in 2006, our company only had two employees, one small room, and one phone that had one extension. Since then, our business has grown exponentially from all perspectives – company size, customer base, number of partners, and revenue. Every year there are changes and we reach new milestones. It's like watching your children grow up each year from birth to becoming a productive adult. For us each year has been wonderful and after sixteen-years it is still ongoing. The ultimate reward for us is neither fame nor money, for us we are rewarded by being inventors who create technology that solves problems for people and businesses. That is the highest level of appreciation you can feel.

