

Softening your on-camera flash

How often do you look at your pictures, cursing those massive black shadows behind the heads of the people you photograph? And wishing you knew how to get rid of them?

It's actually easier than you think. There are several methods, not all of them practical all the time, but two that you can try with a great degree of success are:

1. to move the people away from the wall, and
2. to soften your flash light with a bounce card.



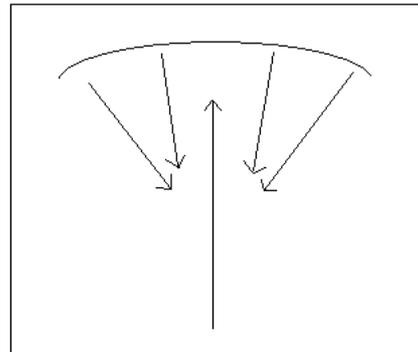
If you have the opportunity to move your subjects further forward from the wall, do so. The wrap-shadow from your flash will then disappear into the empty space behind them, and less of it will be visible against the back wall.

However, if you're doing snapshots of people and you have no control of the situation, this will obviously not work. A typical example is when you shoot social pictures at a function or wedding reception. When you see a nice moment, you shoot – you can't wait.

Your best option here is to build yourself a bounce device. This only applies, I have to add, if you're using a bounce-type flash: a flash gun with a tilt head.

The principle behind this is that any beam of light directed onto a surface will be reflected back at right angles. In the process of reflection, depending on the size and surface of the reflector, the light will spread and be diffused.

So, instead of falling directly onto the subject's face and casting a nasty shadow behind, the beam of light from your flash will hit the bounce card, spread slightly to the left and the right of your subject, and kill the shadow from both sides by its diffuse nature.



How do you build a scoop?

I've seen a few commercially-available ones, anything from a mini-softbox to simply a flat card. They all work. But they could be expensive. And the idea of this newsletter is to help you make these things yourself, on a shoestring budget. So here goes:



As an experiment, I used a plastic bottle. I cut off the section underneath the handle and tried to leave a palm-sized section of bent plastic, like a scoop, which I spray-painted a matt white.

I then fitted this to the swivel part of my flash, fixing it with a piece of adhesive tape. I was hoping that light passing into the scoop would be reflected in many directions and hence soften the quality of the light considerably. It worked, but could do with some refinement.

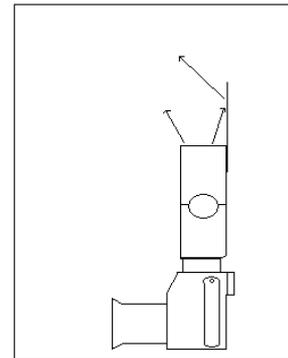
So I experimented, tilting the flash head up and down more and less, and checked the results on my digital camera. Even though this model needed a lot of work, the results were streets ahead of "straight" or direct flash. Have a look at my poor cat/model Angus, and note the softening of the highlights or bright parts of the chair in the second picture:



Another method is to use a flat card rather than the scoop I tried above. Even if you do not have tools available, a simple piece of white card taped to the top of your flashgun will do the trick.

Now tilt the flash directly upwards when you take pictures in both landscape and portrait formats. The light is beam directly up, but part of that light hits the card, and is reflected 90 degrees forward, onto your subject. Because the light is reflected, it is also softened.

The larger the area you beam your flash into, the bigger the area of reflection, and hence the softer the light becomes. At the same time, you have to be practical – you can't walk around with an umbrella-sized reflector!



Try this yourself, but always experiment first before you do a pro job! Note that it will affect your exposure, as you lose a couple of stops of light every time you bounce your flash beam, so you have to compensate by allowing more light onto your lens, or shoot on through-the-lens (TTL) metering so that your camera and flash will automatically take care of exposure.

Greetings
Jaco Wolmarans

PS – I'll upload all newsletters onto my site at www.pictureperfect.co.za/diy.html, in case you missed an issue. You'll always get yours in your inbox, though, unless you unsubscribe by sending me a mail at jaco@pictureperfect.co.za.