

# Bounced Light Offers Beauty on the Cheap

by Bobbi Lane

*Photographers are gadget freaks. We love the latest gizmos, the new and improved tools, the creative and cool methods of manipulating light. Manufacturers know this, and strive to create interesting, versatile accessories for our lighting systems. Many of them are proprietary: the Octalite only attaches to Elinchroms, and Calumet's Fresnel only attaches to its system. And, of course, these specialized pieces of equipment carry a hefty price tag. But I'll tell you about a simple, versatile device that works with any system, produces exquisite light and costs under \$20—foamcore board.*

## White walls and other bounces

Bounce light from foamcore board, white walls, poster board, white paper, a sheet or collapsible reflectors and you'll get a soft, broad light source. In my lighting classes, I demonstrate some fancy lighting accessories, then show the class bounced light. The quality of bounced light is so soft, smooth and beautiful that it works extremely well as a beauty light. Bounced light also can be directional with fall-off. It can mimic window or door light. It can be used to light one person or a group, sometimes an entire room.

Light travels in all directions, so when you point a light perpendicular to your board or wall, it bounces back in a diffused way, providing wide coverage. If the light is behind you, the subject will look flat and even, almost two-dimensional, because there will be no shadows. With the light positioned off the axis of the subject, it still retains directionality. If you light the side wall, then you create a split light with the light falling off into shadow on the opposite side. Remember that the direction of light will define the form, or depth, of your subject (figure 1).

The color of the paint on the walls is important when shooting in color, but not if you're shooting black-and-white. Most offices are painted flat white, which works

very well. But some whites are cooler, resulting in bluish skin tones, and some are off-white, which warms up the skin. Be very critical when looking at paint—some warm whites actually have a green tint, which is disastrous on people. Digital shooters, however, can create a custom white balance and not be affected by the paint tinge.

If you're creating an unusual shot, the colors of the walls can enhance the image. You can bounce light off wood, which will warm the image (though it will not be as soft as light reflected from a painted wall), or off brick that has a reddish tint. The image of the man with the TV lamp was shot using one head bouncing off the opposite wall (figure 2). His walls were a textured yellow-orange, affecting everything, including his skin. Since he is in a creative industry and this is an editorial shot, it's about effect, not accuracy. Notice how soft the light is and how smooth the skin tones are. The shadows are also light and soft. Since the light is bouncing everywhere, it automatically fills in the shadows.

## Size matters

It's not the size of the strobe head that matters; it's the size of the bounce surface you're using. The larger the area used to bounce light, the softer and broader the light source becomes because the light comes from more directions, filling in all the shadows. One head placed close to a white wall illuminates about four-square-feet, creating a light source of that size. One head pulled back to a distance of six-to-eight feet illuminates about 12 square feet, so the light reflects everywhere, shadows transit slowly and a lot of light falls on the background. Pull the light further away and you light the walls, ceiling and floors, creating a giant light. This creates a flat, two-dimensional photo that looks like a painting, and is very flattering for skin tones.

Light quality is affected by the condition of the room. Rooms with dark walls have little extra bounce, so shadows are darker. This will look more like dramatic window or door light, depending on the size of the bounce. If the room is white,

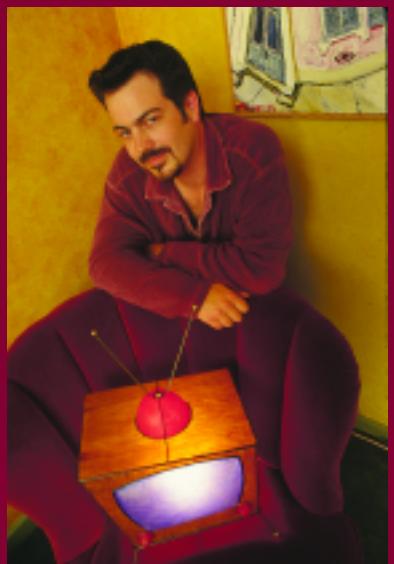
light will bounce everywhere, providing a soft fill.

## Foamcore

If you don't have a white wall, bring one with you. Here's the foamcore trick. Foamcore, which is lightweight and inexpensive, comes in various sizes from 8x10



**Figure 1. Man in Suit.** One light bounced into wall to his left, white card on other side as fill. Two additional lights bounced off ceiling to illuminate the background.



**Figure 2. Man with TV lamp.** One strobe light bounced into wall opposite subject.

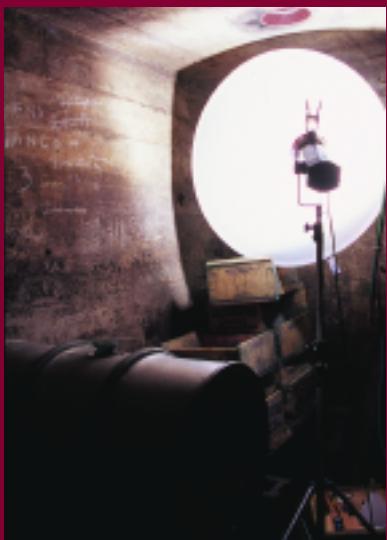


Figure 3. Lighting setup for figure 4 and 5.



Figure 4. Aldo Making Wine. Light bounced into reflector.

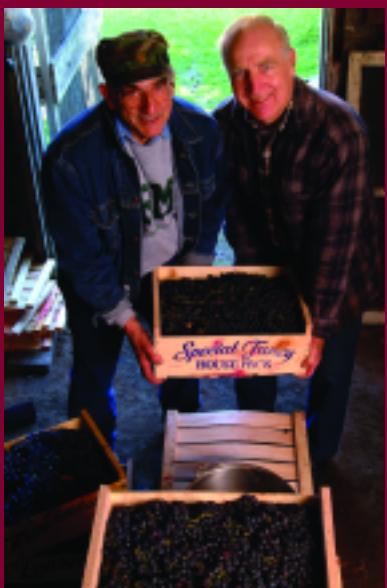


Figure 5.

inches to 4×8 feet. You can buy larger sizes and cut it to any size you desire with a matte knife. I cut many shapes—squares, rectangles, round, elongated—for little bounces or fills. Foamcore is sold at pro photo and art-supply stores and varies in thickness from  $\frac{3}{16}$ – $\frac{1}{4}$  inch. On location, I bring several sizes of foamcore and a couple of collapsible reflectors, and clamp them to stands or whatever is handy. That way I can always control the size and direction of my light. Sometimes a location is cramped and a soft box or umbrella takes up too much room. Tape or clamp some foamcore to the wall, bounce one head and you're ready to go.

### Collapsible reflectors

Collapsible reflectors, also known as light discs or flex fills, are another popular choice for bouncing light. Comprised of a hard outer ring covered with durable fabric, they're usually white on one side with a variety of choices for the other, including silver, gold, soft gold or black. They fold, with some practice, to one-third their open size, making them quite portable.

Collapsible reflectors come in various sizes: 12, 22, 32, 42 and 52 inches. Some manufacturers also make oval panels. Multidiscs come with a core diffuser and then have reversible covers with white/black and gold/silver. I have various sizes of reflectors in white/soft gold, which I find to be the most useful.

Prices range from around \$35–60, depending on the size. Some reflectors are diffusers that come with reversible covers in white/black and silver/gold. A 32-inch

reflector is great for tight headshots, a 42-inch one will illuminate a  $\frac{3}{4}$  shot and the 52 inch will do a full length shot.

### How it works in the field

To photograph winemaker Aldo Biagiotti, I used one 42-inch reflector balanced on a box, leaning against the wall, and bounced a Calumet Travelite Monolight into it. I also added a  $\frac{1}{4}$  CTO gel to warm the light up a little (figure 3). The light spilled over the reflector onto the concrete walls and ceiling of the root cellar making a slightly broader light. Since the room was dark, the shadows had more depth, creating a little more drama (figure 4). When Aldo is turned into the light, the coverage is broad and the light is rich (figure 5).

The shots of Aldo and friends at the table were done similarly. You can almost see the set up in the glass reflections. I clamped a 20×30-inch white card to a stand at about a 45° angle to the subjects. I also bounced one head into the ceiling on the opposite side of them, set about one stop under the main light to make the shadows lighter. I measured the light at the wine glasses. You can see the beautiful wraparound light on the bottle and the gradual fall-off on the people. Their skin tones look good and the room behind them has light (figure 6).

### Foamcore in the studio

In the studio, my first choice for fill cards is a "V" built from two 4×8-foot panels of foamcore. I tape them together along one 8-foot edge with gaffers tape, forming a



Figure 6. Aldo and friends with wine. I used one light bounced into 20x30 foamcore at 45° angle to subjects. Additional light bounced into ceiling on opposite side for fill at one stop less than the main light.



**Figure 7.** *Rebecca in V. Two lights bounced into 4x8-foot sheets of foamcore taped into a V. Additional light in umbrella to light background.*



**Figure 8.** *Lindsay 1 and Lindsay 2. Image 1 (left) is overcast with white reflector. Image 2 (right) is backlit with soft gold reflector feathered, catching hazy sunlight and bouncing back into her face.*



"V" that stands by itself and can be opened to any angle. I use this both for a large fill and as a bounced light source.

The most flattering and forgiving way to light for wrinkles, textured or dappled skin is to light as flat as possible. For a fabulous beauty light, use two "V"s with four heads bouncing into them. Open up the "V"s so that singly they form an "L" and together they form a "U," then place them together forming an 8×8-foot wall that is parallel to the background. The sides of the "L" will be at right angles pointing at the background. Place all four lights pointing into the 8×8-foot sides, making sure that they are close to the subject's center and above eye-level. If the lights are too low, you will create soft "monster" light.

The sides of the panels that point toward the background act as fill. The photographer can stand in front of the panels, between the foamcore and the subject (the light will spread around the photographer), or separate the two panels and shoot through the small gap (be mindful of flare). If you sit where the subject is, you can see how the light covers everything completely. If light comes from everywhere, defects disappear because there are no shadows or contrast.

The photograph of the model sitting on the bed is lit with one set of foamcore panels in a "V" (figure 7). Two strobe heads point into the "V," one higher than the other, so she has even, full coverage all the way to her feet. The "V" is about 45° to her body and she is turned slightly into it. There is an additional light with

an umbrella on the same side as the "V," which is pointed only at the background. I wanted the feeling of a large door letting in light, which called for a fairly bright background with gradual fall-off. There is another foamcore "V" on her right side (camera left) for fill. You can control the size and spread of the light by how much you open the "V." A diffuser panel set in front of the opening of the "V" softens the light more and brings down the highlights slightly.

### Available-light bounce

When photographing people, keep in mind that skin is reflective. If you are outside in the shade or backlit, the subject is lit by the sky, which is a soft light source. Skin still reflects everything around it: grass, trees, sidewalks and photographers. I always use a white card or reflector in the shade to clean up the skin tones a bit. Sometimes the shade, depending on how deep it is, will be very cool, requiring a warming filter such as an 81A or 81B. Another option is to use a gold or soft gold reflector to warm the light. If you catch direct sunlight with a gold reflector, it's like a mirror, and will blow out as well as blind your subject. But in hazy sun, a soft gold reflector, feathered slightly, can work wonders.

The two photographs of the young women (figure 8) were done with reflectors and shot with my digital camera. For the purposes of this article, I did not color correct, just lightened them to match the density on the skin. In both photos, the

subject was sitting under an umbrella to shade her from the sun. In the first shot, the sun was behind a cloud, so the light was very cool, (Digital Lindsay 1) but I still used a white reflector to even out her skin tones. She was sitting on a dock in Camden Harbor, Maine, selling trips on a schooner, so she was surrounded by the dock, people, and boats in the harbor. In other words, by a muddle of visual information.

In the second shot, a bit of sun poked through the clouds. I used a soft gold reflector, not too close, and feathered slightly to add warmth without too much contrast. (Digital Lindsay 2) The first image is much flatter, while the second has more dimension and warmth. Both work, it's just a matter of taste and intent.

### Conclusion

I own a full range of lighting devices, but sometimes the simplest solutions are the best. I always keep reflectors, foamcore, gaffer's tape and clamps in my car, so I'm prepared for any lighting challenge. ■

*Bobbi Lane is a commercial, travel and stock photographer with 27 years experience in running workshops. She photographs people on location for corporate and advertising accounts, as well as "real people" for stock. Based in Connecticut, Bobbi teaches at ICP and the New School in New York City, as well as workshops in Maine, Santa Fe and Los Angeles. Her web site is [www.bobbilane.com](http://www.bobbilane.com)*