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A cheap way of getting a good softbox

Softboxes make lights bigger, and because of this they can produce soft lighting – whether they do or not, and how well they do it depends on how they’re used, and whether soft lighting is right depends on the purpose of the shot – but as soft lighting is an important purpose, it makes sense to get a softbox that does the job well....

But not all softboxes are equal, and some do the job badly because of poor design and/or poor materials. Professional-quality softboxes such as Chimera or Elinchrom are very expensive, so I’ve produced this tutorial to show you how a very cheap softbox can be improved beyond recognition.

This is an imported, 54” octagonal softbox that has an inner diffuser, fitted to the walls with Velcro. There’s nothing wrong with using Velcro, but unfortunately they’ve left a big gap between the inner diffuser and the walls, which allows light to bypass the diffuser.



Here's a closer shot, showing the original fixing.



You can see how easy it was to get rid of the gap. A bit Heath Robinson but it works...

And it's easy to glue pieces of Velcro to the walls, to get a permanent and neater solution. It's also an advantage to have the diffuser in its new position, further away from the front diffuser, because more distance improves the diffusion effect.



Now I turned my attention to the front diffuser.

The design is fine as it is, but the material it's made from just isn't thick enough and it passes too much light, so it can't spread the light as well as it should.

I decided to fit an extra layer of diffusion, immediately behind the front diffuser.

So I spent a whole £2.99 of my hard-earned cash on a plain white shower curtain. For twice as much money I could have got a much thicker one, but the one that I did get is much better than the diffuser on the softbox so I didn't see the point...



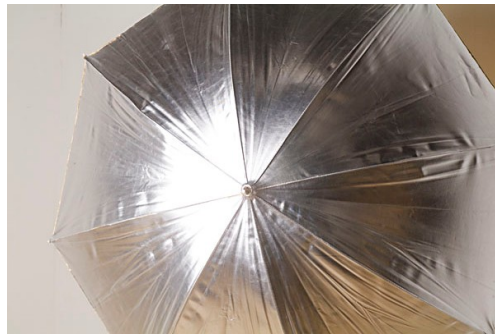
The next job was to lay the front diffuser on top of the shower curtain, cut around it and then spend a few pence worth of clear Bostic to glue the edges of the cutout to the inside of the original.

And then of course I fitted the new improved version of the front diffuser to the softbox. Job done.

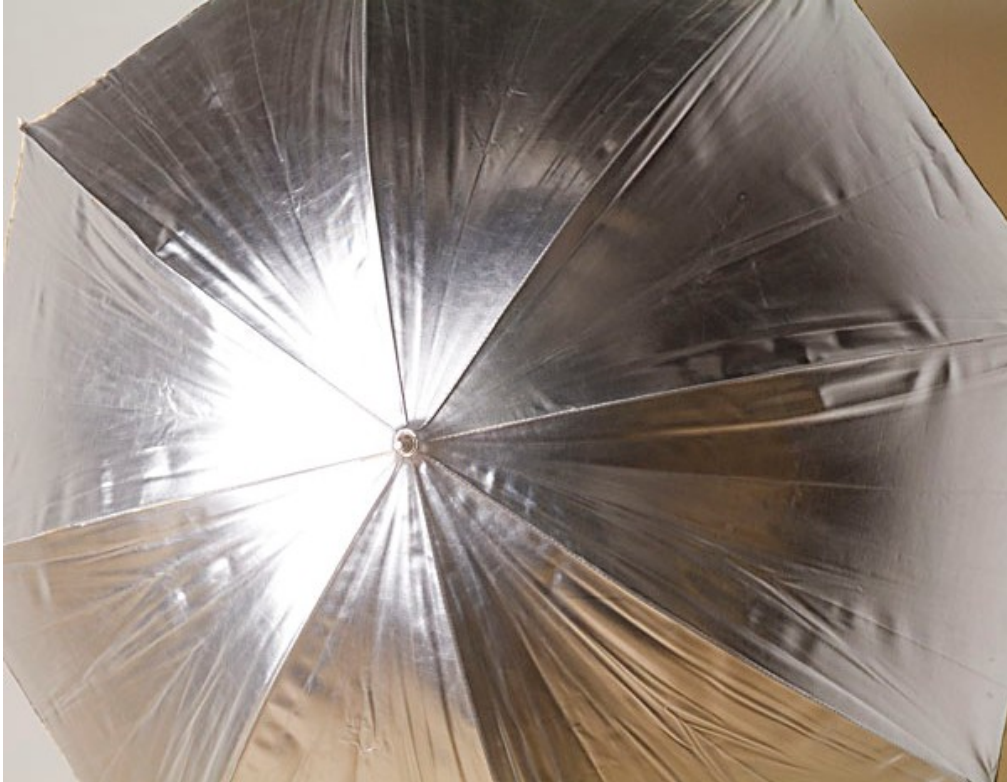
But was the job necessary and did it work? Yes and yes.

Before I started, I took a test shot of a difficult subject, a shiny lighting umbrella.

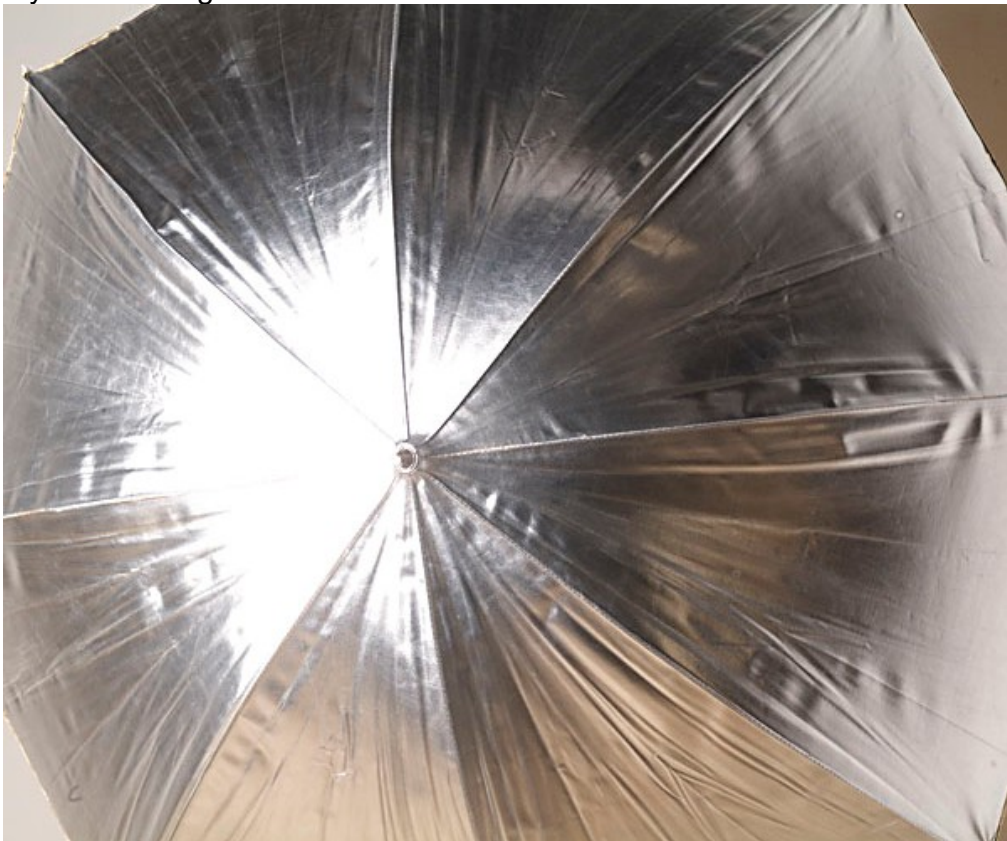
You can see a very bright specular highlight (reflection of the softbox) on the umbrella.



You can see from the before and after shots below that the main specular highlight is just as bright in the after-shot but is larger and a little more diffused. If I had wanted to produce really soft lighting, so that the specular highlights were diffused instead of being completely burned out, I would have used different lighting tools, and would have used them very close to the subject.



But the main improvement, as you can see, is to the overall contrast, which is much lower in the after- shot below. The light is much softer, even on this extreme subject – you can imagine how much softer it would be on a face!



What effect has modifying the softbox had on exposure?

Improving the efficiency of the diffusion spreads the light better, and this has an effect of the amount of light that actually reaches the subject – but not much!

The meter reading before modifications was f/8, after improving the softbox efficiency the reading was f/5.6 decimal 4, so the light loss was just 0.6 of a stop.

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