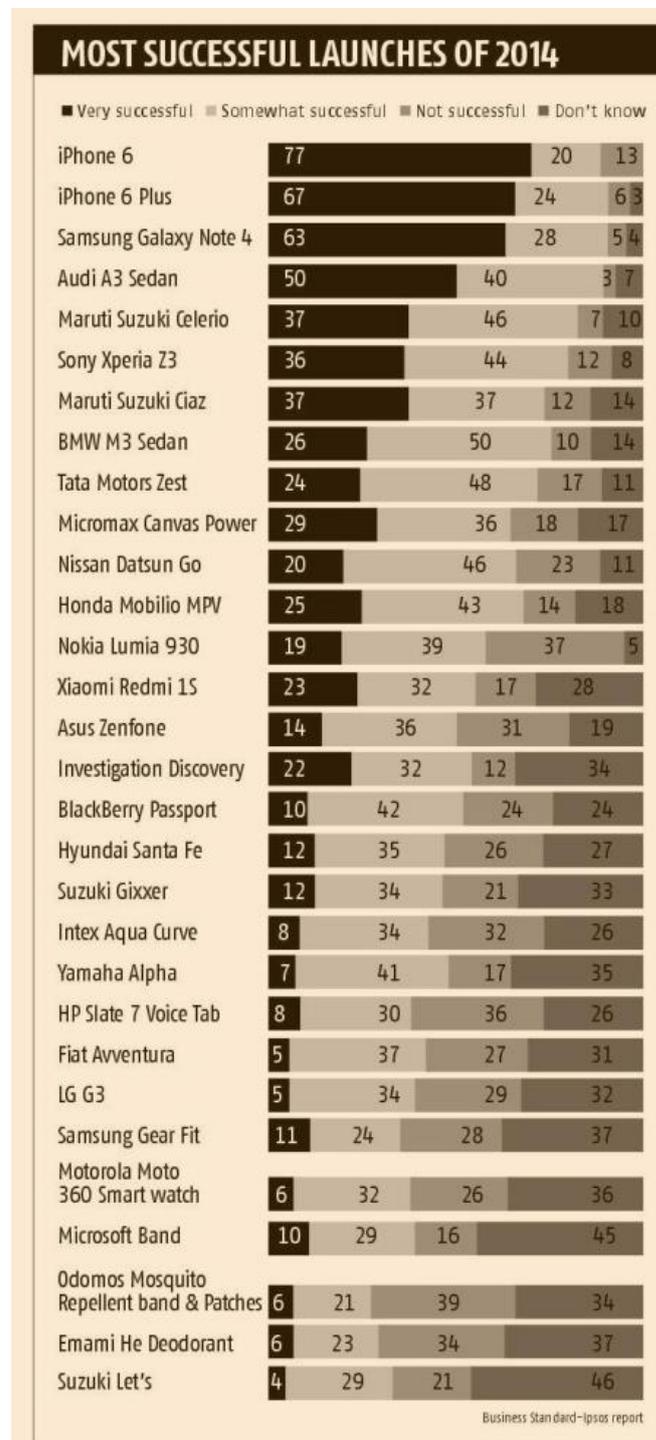


Leading the charge

The Apple iPhone 6 emerged the clear winner in the Brand Derby, followed by the iPhone 6 Plus, Samsung Galaxy Note 4, Audi A3 and the Maruti Suzuki Celerio.

A new product launch is a hectic and intense exercise for a marketer. That exercise helps the marketer plan and control activities before committing to the market plan and before market feedback has foreclosed some of the options. The first thing a company should ideally identify is the intended positioning, keeping in mind the **USP** of the product. The other elements of the **marketing** mix can then be put in place to ensure that the desired goal is achieved. The success of a new product or brand doesn't depend on getting one part of marketing mix right. A company has to get most of it, if not all the things, right - product, price, positioning and distribution - to achieve significant success, something the top five brands on this year's Brand Derby list clearly illustrate.



The Brand Derby is a survey that Business Standard carries out every year among senior marketing professionals to rank the successful brand launches of the previous year and understand what sets the winners apart from the losers. The [Apple iPhone 6](#) came out as the clear winner this time, led by global hype, product superiority and the company's strategy to give the brand an image of exclusivity. It was followed by the iPhone 6 Plus, Samsung Galaxy Note 4, [Audi A3](#) and Maruti Suzuki Celerio. Each of these brands had a marketing mix that was consistent with the product positioning, irrespective of the segment they operated in. **(MOST SUCCESSFUL LAUNCHES OF 2014)**

Like last year, this year too [smartphones](#) dominated the most successful launches taking the top three slots, with two auto brands completing the top 5 line-up. If we look at top 10 launches, the share of technology and automobile brands is 50:50. Interestingly, last year there were six automobile brands and four technology brands among the top 10.

So what were the factors that separated the men from the boys? An understanding of consumer needs is critical for a successful product launch. Brands must know if and how a market has changed and what is it that consumers want in the new context. Yes, some things have become easier with technology - the amount of consumer data at the disposal of the marketer is immense - but it is equally true that competition has multiplied in every category and consumer expectation from brands have also become high and diverse.

This makes the task of creating a clear-cut positioning among consumers challenging. "The elements of the marketing mix provide direct and indirect cues to consumers who then form their own opinion based on their experiences. This is a challenging process for a company and all the top five brands in the Business Standard Brand derby survey, have been very good at managing this process," says Siddharth S Singh, associate professor marketing, ISB.

What does a smart brand do under the circumstances? They offer consumers a lot more than what competition does.

Take the Audi A3. It is the only sedan in the segment and competes against the likes of Mercedes Benz's A Class, BMW's 1 Series and Volvo's V40. All are hatchbacks, and for a similar pricing Audi offers a sedan. "Brand Audi has positioned itself one that is synonymous with success. It is an alpha male positioning, as the brand embodies style, power and class," says Atish Chattopadhyay, dean, MICA.

The other important thing in a highly competitive marketplace is consumer engagement. "For example, Apple owes its success to innovation. For its users, the brand creates curiosity regarding what's going to be the next big thing from Apple," says Chattopadhyay.

Now, more than ever before, brands are trying to make consumers part of the process of building a brand. That is where innovation comes in. Consider the case of Maruti Suzuki Celerio. What turned the tide for the Celerio is the fact that it was one of the first models in India that was made available with an affordable automatic transmission. The consumer who aspired for an automatic car has to shell out quite a lot to upgrade. The Celerio starts at Rs 3.96 lakh (ex-showroom, Delhi) and the

automated manual transmission (AMT) version costs Rs 39,500 more.

While distribution, promotion and price are important factors for a product launch, in the end the product itself is the make-or-break factor. "During the launch, a price cushion might be kept for future adjustments and manoeuvrability unless the very reason for the new offer is price. Distribution can accordingly be less extensive and more targeted to early adopters. Advertising will have to be attention seeking and communicating the compelling reason to buy. On the product side, while the range can be quite small (even a single model would do), it must be glitch free, the USP should be clear," says AP Arora, professor, marketing, MDI Gurgaon.

Consumers purchase a brand because they find superior value. And this remains true in the context of all the successful brand launches this time. For example, with prices starting at Rs 22.95 lakh (ex-showroom Delhi), the Audi A3 is cheapest compact luxury sedan in its segment. [Maruti Suzuki Celerio](#) is the first hatchback to boast of AMT with super mileage. The iPhone 6 with 4.7-inch HD display is the first big-screen smartphone offering from Apple. The Samsung Galaxy Note 4, on the other hand, is a fantastic product at a good price.

All the brands that have stood apart in the survey have also tapped the digital media in a big way to reach out to their target consumers. Although consumers still purchase based on perceived superior value, disruptions in the marketplace change the set of opportunities available to companies.

Net net, how companies create superior value can change over time as a market changes. But the one thing that comes out clearly from the results of this year's survey is that nothing can undermine a great product.