

Hype, hype, hooray!

With all the races wide open, this year's Oscar campaigns can best be described as manic, yet businesslike.

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Radio Daze

Sirius and XM are counting on holiday shoppers to take the plunge into satellite radio.

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Ben Ammar leveraging media clout

By ALISON JAMES

PARIS He has probably found media dealmaking more lucrative, but Tarak Ben Ammar still has a serious movie-making itch to scratch.



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The Paris-based film producer recently said he was investing in three Dino De Laurentiis projects. They are the Hannibal Lecter prequel "Behind the Mask," "The Last Legion" and "The Decameron."

"Dino and I have known each other for 20 years," Ben Ammar, 55, tells *Variety*. "These are exactly the kinds of high quality projects I'm looking to back."

As well as having such financial clout and powerful friends as Rupert Murdoch, Silvio Berlusconi and Prince Al Waleed bin Talal, Tunisian-born Ben Ammar, a polyglot whose uncle was Tunisia's first president, has been ramping up his own Quinta Communications. Berlusconi owns a 29% stake in the 10-year-old company.

Among his recent moves: launching a sports channel and a digital terrestrial platform in Italy in partnership with France's TF1, creating a French theatrical distribution company to release Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the

Christ," buying up bankrupt post-production facilities in France and launching a French partnership with Technicolor.

But these moves are all part of a master plan whose main purpose is to give Ben Ammar more media clout.

"I've now really put a foot in every single media business, except for newspapers. I'm a producer of features and television (via stakes in Italy's Lux and in French producer A Prime), I'm a film distributor, I've post-production facil., I own studios in Tunisia and TV stations in Italy, so really I'm in all the facets of media and I learn from each of them."

Making bigger and better movies — and more of them — is central to his scheme.

Says Ben Ammar: "I used to finance one film every three or four years, but now that I own a distribution company and post facilities, I'd like to be involved in three, four or five films a year."

Over the past two years, he has snapped up three French post-production facilities that were about to go

under — Ex Machina, Duran Duboi and laboratory LTC — spending €20 million (\$26.9 million) on acquiring and restructuring them.

The deal with Technicolor is aimed at bringing more business the way of those companies, while ensuring they remain top-notch technically.

He also expects to bring back to France some of the local printmaking business that Technicolor takes care of at its facilities in the U.K. and Italy. More than half of the nearly 1.5 billion feet of film used in the French movie business each year is manufactured outside the country.

"If I invest \$10 million or \$20 million in a movie, now some of it will be spent in companies that I control, in technology that I control, and at standards of international filmmaking."

He may have done so in the past, but Ben Ammar says he's finished putting his money into second-rate fare the studios don't want.

"In the last five years, I've been able to assess the needs of independent film financing, to understand the difficulty of

'Now that I own a distribution company and post facilities, I'd like to be involved in three, four or five films a year.'

— Tarak Ben Ammar



Tarak Ben Ammar, long considered an outsider in the Gallic film biz, has invested in key production infrastructure.

getting good scripts," he says. "I've had some of the bad ones — the Franchise projects from Warner Bros. — looking for money overseas. Today I'm more careful, more sophisticated."

He can also count on the advice of Evi Fullenbach, a former Canal Plus acquisitions topper who was snapped up by Quinta earlier this year.

"When I read a script now I think all the way down: Is it good for theatrical, video, television, and also is it good for my post-production facilities?"