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"We do have plans for acquisitions," said Ajmal. "We were positively looking at some things ... but in terms of priorities expansions come first then acquisitions. We are looking West, France primarily, at mid-size companies." He said that the family-run business, whose clients include Gulf Arab ruling families, was looking to add 80 new stores to its existing 120 in the Gulf within five years. Ajmal, which sells perfume that can cost up to 5,000 UAE dirhams (\$1,361), distributes its products in the Gulf region and in 20 countries in Southeast Asia, Europe and the Americas. Companies in the world's largest oil exporting region are increasingly moving abroad as they face growing competition and saturation in their home markets and seek opportunities from falling asset prices in global economic crisis. The 58-year old business will delay opening its first European store until Christmas 2010 due to the downturn, Ajmal said. The store, planned for London, was originally slated to open this year.

The market slowdown has not had a major effect on the company's sales, which decreased by only 2 percent in the first half of 2009, compared with the same period last year.

The company had a turnover of \$200 million in 2008, with sales growing at a rate of 10 percent to 12 percent a year, Ajmal said. He said he expected similar growth in 2009.

"We have been affected like others, but remain resilient," he said. "Culturally, perfumes are seen as a necessity so people would cut down on other expenditures."

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is its largest market, followed by Saudi Arabia, which Ajmal said he expected to grow to double the size of the UAE market over the next decade. -Reuters

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