**One step ahead of utility scammers**

Earlier this year, Jason Barth received an all-too-familiar phone call from a scammer attempting to trick him into paying an energy bill he didn't owe. Barth helps run his family's fourth generation retail meat market in Central Illinois. The market is brisk with foot traffic – ripe for scammers looking to catch him during peak hours.

"It happens about once a month," said Barth one morning while preparing the store for the afternoon rush. "They'll say they're with Ameren, we're late our bill and need to hurry up and wire them money so our power won't be disconnected."

The first time it happened, the caller indicated that a truck was a mere two blocks away and in route to disconnect the power. Barth asked specific questions about his account and it soon became apparent that the caller was impersonating an Ameren representative. He immediately hung up, quickly dialed the Ameren Illinois customer service line and spoke to a customer care specialist who reassured him that the caller was a fraud.

These days Barth takes the calls in stride, even toying with the callers at times to see if he can find out who they are or where they are calling from. He knows it's a serious matter that can impact any small business and he has some advice for others.

"These people will try anything and everything to get your money," he said. "I tell everyone to remember that Ameren will never demand payment over the phone. Also, you need to make sure that everyone who works for you – anyone who could pick up the phone –knows what to look for."