ROBERT SIEGEL, HOST:

It's ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Robert Siegel.

The Amish are known for their commitment to old technology. They prefer a horse and buggy over a car. They won't use zippers in clothing, and most do not want their houses connected to the electrical grid. Outsiders often assume that the Amish reject all new technology, but the reality is more complicated than that. NPR's Jeff Brady explains why. And he begins our report in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

JEFF BRADY, BYLINE: We're going to start by blowing apart that assumption about rejecting new technology.

SAM: See, I got to see who called here.

BRADY: This is an Amish man checking his voicemail.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: You have one unheard message. First unheard message.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: Yeah. Good morning (unintelligible). Yeah.

BRADY: The phone belongs to a farmer named Sam. He doesn't want his last name on the radio. In some Amish communities, using your full name in the media is considered showing off or trying to speak for all Amish. Like many Amish, Sam is still deciding what technologies he's comfortable with.

Donald Kraybill is a professor at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. He recently co-authored a book that includes a chapter on Amish technology. Kraybill says most of us think that the newest technology is automatically a good thing.

DONALD KRAYBILL: The Amish don't buy that. They're - they are more cautious, more suspicious, wondering, is this going to be helpful or is it going to be detrimental? Is it going to bolster our life together as a community or is it going to somehow tear it down?

BRADY: Kraybill says there are 40 different Amish affiliations around the country, and they often reach different answers to those questions.

KRAYBILL: Some of the subgroups are very conservative, very isolated and very - and doing very well protecting their way of life because they basically reject much more technology than the more progressive ones.

BRADY: The people you'll hear from in this story belong to Amish communities that are more likely to embrace new technology. But the process of doing that can lead to seemingly contradictory conclusions. On Sam's farm, there's a phone, but not in the house where he says it could disrupt family life. There's no car or truck. That kind of mobility could scatter the tight-knit community. But Sam's horse and buggy has lighted turn signals and his son's has a battery-powered windshield wiper. Out in the tool shop, Sam picks up a power drill that can do double-duty as a kitchen appliance.

SAM: This here will do anything.

(SOUNDBITE OF POWER DRILL)

SAM: You can mix mashed potatoes. You put a mixer in here and the ladies have one in the house, and woe to the husband who takes it out in the shop. If that thing's in the house, it stays there.

BRADY: People here don't reject electricity, but they do reject the grid that brings it into most homes. The Amish believe this life on Earth is part of their journey to heaven. Professor Kraybill says if you're just here as a pilgrim...

KRAYBILL: Then you don't want to get too engaged and too embedded in this world, with the culture of this world and the ways of this world because you may lose your ultimate, eternal goal of completing the journey to heaven.

BRADY: Back to Sam's farm and that cordless drill, you may be wondering how he re-charges it. Sam heads out back and points to something on the roof.

SAM: This is, I guess, what you call the slippery slope of modernity.

BRADY: It's a solar panel, and it's been there for a while. But Sam still isn't convinced solar panels are a good thing.

SAM: Well, they're bringing a little bit too much stuff. Some kids are running TVs with them. And well, C-B - how do you say that, B-V-Ds?

BRADY: DVDs.

SAM: DVDs. That's not so great.

BRADY: Despite this ambivalence, the Amish have begun embracing new technology at a faster rate. One reason is because more of them are working as entrepreneurs instead of on a farm. This shift creates new problems that technology often has an answer for.

Ben is another Amish man in Lancaster County. He also doesn't want his last name on the radio. Ben owns a deli, and says he tracks all his finances with paper and pencil.

BEN: I would really love to have QuickBooks because it's a pain to balance my checkbook.

BRADY: But that would require a computer, and Ben is reluctant to leap into the digital world. He plans to think long and hard before making a decision. Ben says he's following this advice.

BEN: You shouldn't be the first in your neighborhood to adopt a new technology, neither should you be the last. And I guess that's - personally, that's kind of where I am, kind of middle of the road. I don't like to make waves.

BRADY: Ben says evaluating new technologies is something that takes place between the push of progress and the pull of tradition. And in the background, there's always one big question: Will this technology hurt the Amish way of life? While that evaluation process can be slow, changes that have taken place so far have allowed Amish businesses to grow.

We're at Homestead Structures in New Holland, Pennsylvania. This Amish-owned company constructs small buildings, such as storage sheds and pool houses. Owner Stephen Stoltzfus says he has 19 employees.

STEPHEN STOLTZFUS: And then there's all types of saws and tools - air tools, some electric tools and hydraulic-run tools.

BRADY: There are solar panels and a diesel generator for the electric tools.

STOLTZFUS: We seem to be able to compete with other companies that use electric off the grid.

BRADY: Stoltzfus says his company has a website too. An outside marketing firm maintains it for him.

STOLTZFUS: We have telephones in the office. And for our bookkeeping, we have what they call word processors.

BRADY: Stoltzfus is among the Amish businessmen who have entered the computer age. A company that outfits computers for Amish people touts in its advertising what the machines do not have: no Internet, no video, no music. So all these contortions, finding ways to enjoy the benefits of technology while maintaining tradition, it may seem a bit like cheating. But Professor Kraybill says there's another term for it.

KRAYBILL: One of my friends called it Amish hacking, and it's not hacking the Internet, but it's learning how to get around the restrictions in ways that are acceptable within the moral order of the community.

BRADY: The Amish don't automatically embrace what's new. They evaluate it and decide if it's a good fit for the lives they want to lead. The professor believes that is where the Amish may have a little something to teach the rest of us. Jeff Brady, NPR News.